



EDGE

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

SKY

THE CREATORS OF JOURNEY
UNLEASH THE FUTURE OF
MULTIPLAYER GAMING

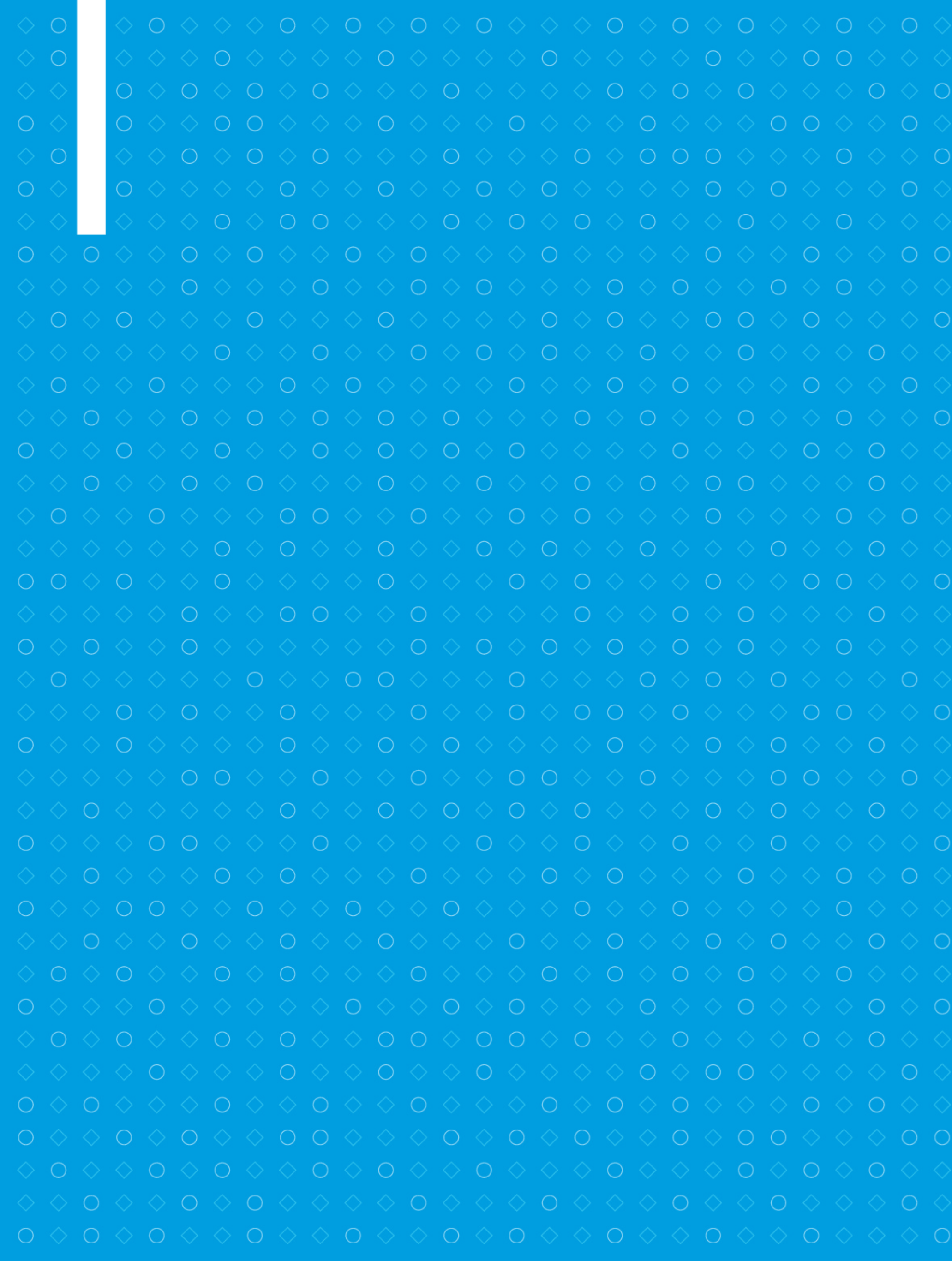


#331

MAY 2019

REVIEWED

DEVIL MAY CRY 5
ANTHEM
FAR CRY NEW DAWN
CRACKDOWN 3
DEAD OR ALIVE 6
TRIALS RISING



It's been a minute since I called on a friend

Smartphones are one of the defining technologies of our lifetimes: an innovation that didn't disrupt the status quo so much as redefine it. Their influence on the game industry has been seismic, too. Not just through sheer ubiquity, though that is clearly a factor. Rather, it is in the way they have democratised game development and publishing. In the old days – you know, 20 years ago – you couldn't make a game for commercial sale without a development licence from a platform holder. And good luck getting it out there without a publisher. The App Store, and later Google Play, changed all that, and the industry had little choice but to follow suit.

In just a decade, smartphones have redefined the game industry, yet they have also given it a host of problems. One is that, as more powerful hardware and operating systems are released, many games are being left behind. Even before the great 'apocalypse' of iOS 11 wiped an estimated 200,000 32bit apps from the App Store, a load of the old classics were fading away, as developers weighed up the cost of keeping their old games updated against the likely revenue from doing so, and decided it was no longer worth it. In Knowledge this month we uncover a new company, GameClub, that's working by hand to restore those old classics and get them back on the App Store where they belong.

Another element to GameClub's mission is to correct the perception of mobile games as exploitative Skinner boxes – which brings us rather neatly to our cover star. *Sky* may be free to play, but it's a game that looks set to disrupt, just as its host hardware has, our expectations of what games can be. Thatgamecompany's latest game takes the central theme of *Journey* – pleasant ambient multiplayer with kindly strangers – and expands on it, uniting up to eight players, drawn from all corners of the biggest videogame audience on the planet, in a beautiful shared world that lives in your pocket. *Sky* looks beautiful, plays wonderfully, and feels thoroughly important. Our story begins on p58.



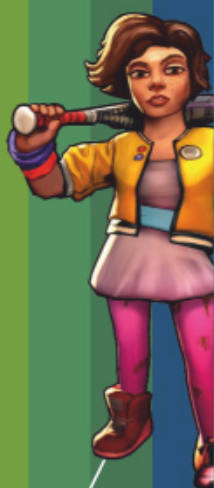
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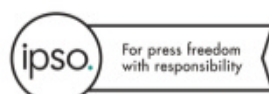
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Restore point

Thousands of iOS games have been consigned to history. One company is [working to bring them back](#)

They called it the 'apocalypse', and it was no overstatement. With the launch of iOS 11 in September 2017, Apple ended support for 32bit software on the App Store, meaning that any legacy app that wasn't updated to run in 64bit would be rendered obsolete overnight. No one, outside Cupertino at least, knows precisely how many apps were lost that day, but one analysis put the figure at over 200,000 – almost ten per cent of the entire iOS catalogue. The effect on the store's game library was brutal. In the App Store's early days, an **Edge** feature ran down the 50 best games to be had from it. By the start of 2018, only half a dozen of those were



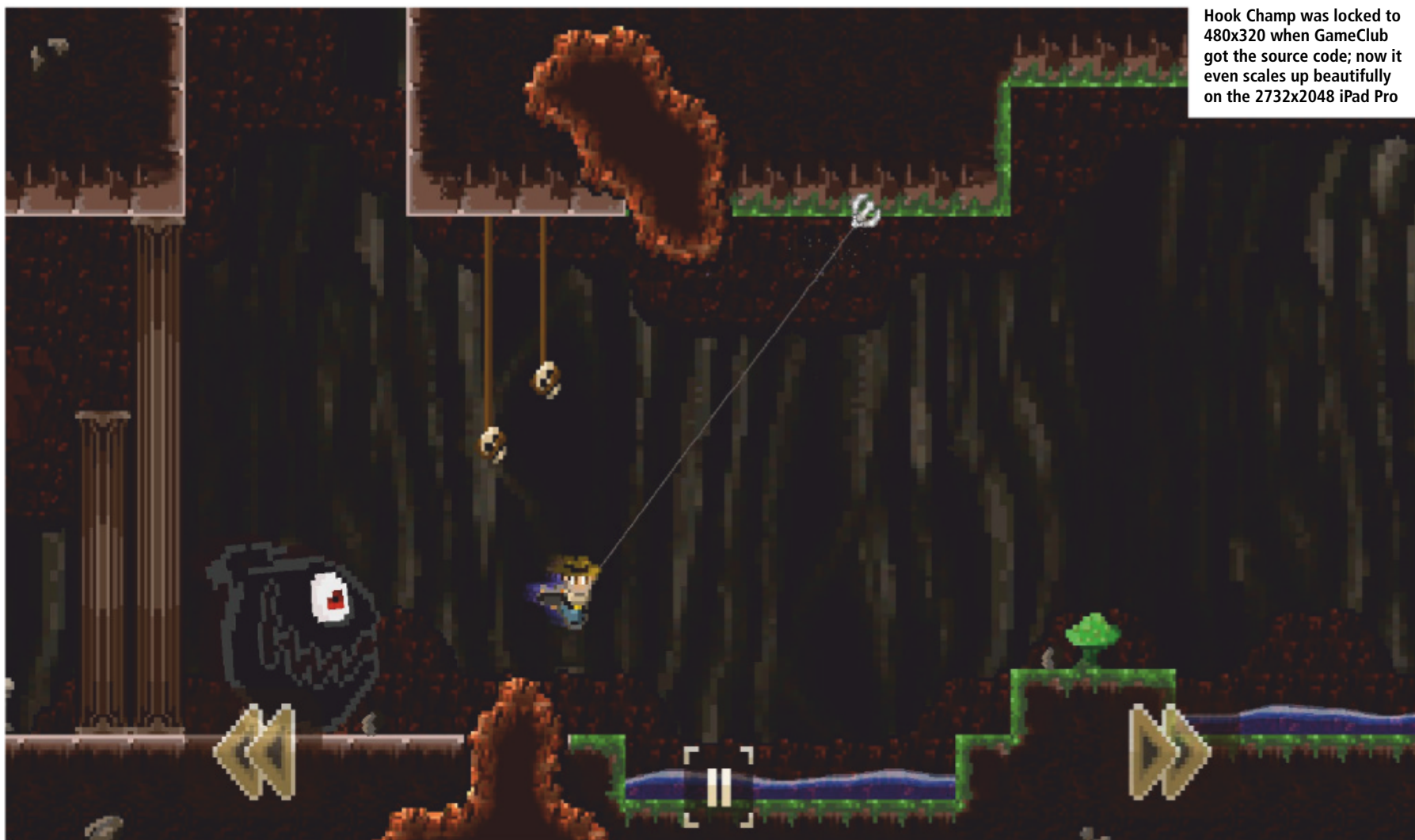
Eli Hodapp, VP of business development, GameClub

still available. For **Eli Hodapp**, then-editor-in-chief of the mobile gaming website Touch Arcade, the apocalypse was the last straw.

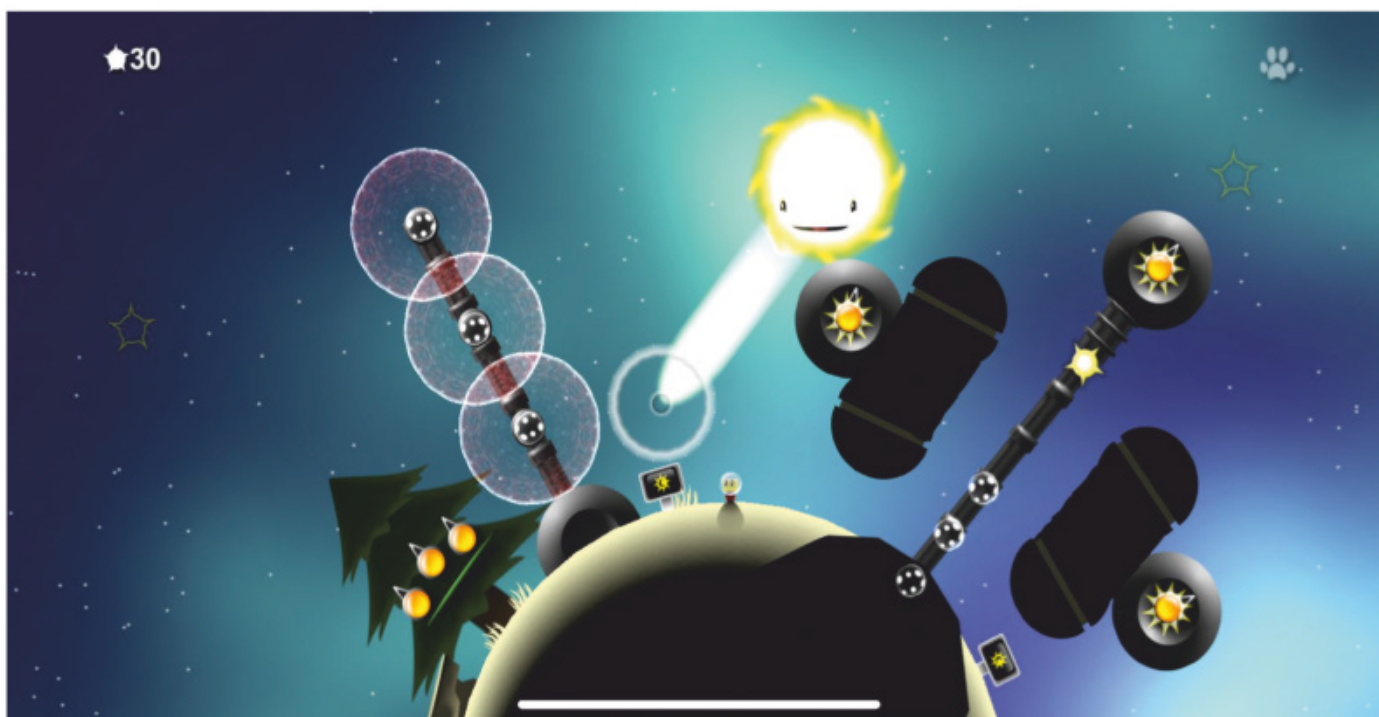
Hodapp had been part of the website since the early days – it launched in 2008 – having seen immediately the promise of a marketplace that so democratised the business of making and releasing games. "Back then people were ridiculing the iPhone," he tells us. "Everyone remembers the Steve Ballmer video where he's just unable to compose himself because he's laughing so much about how expensive the iPhone is. But what was interesting about that time was that you had all these indie developers

that, for the very first time, had this unbelievable level of accessibility to a huge customer base. Before the iPhone, if I was some random dude in my bedroom making videogames in my spare time, what method of distribution would I possibly have? The App Store changed everything."

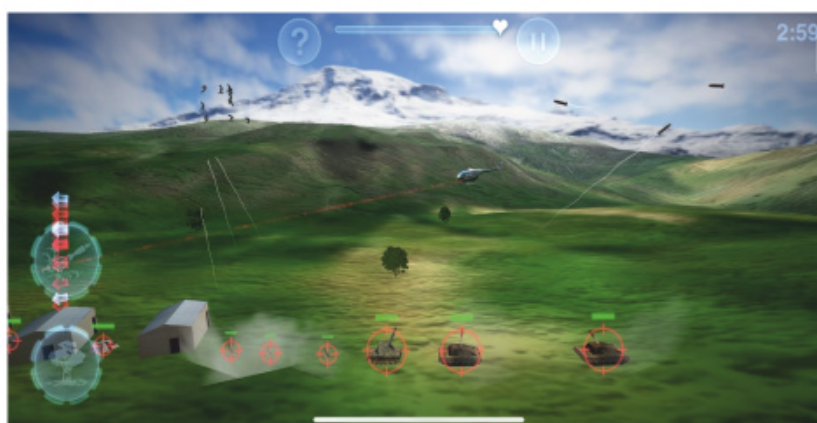
As the years rolled by, certain games Hodapp and his colleagues had championed in the App Store's formative years began to disappear. With each new OS or device release, another handful would fall away. To many small developers, the work required to keep an old game compatible with new iOS devices and operating systems was no ►



Hook Champ was locked to 480x320 when GameClub got the source code; now it even scales up beautifully on the 2732x2048 iPad Pro



MAIN The Bafta-nominated *Incoboto*. ABOVE *Space Miner*, a Touch Arcade game of the year. RIGHT *Chopper 2*'s developer removed it from the App Store in 2016



MEMBERSHIP FREE

An offer small studios can't refuse

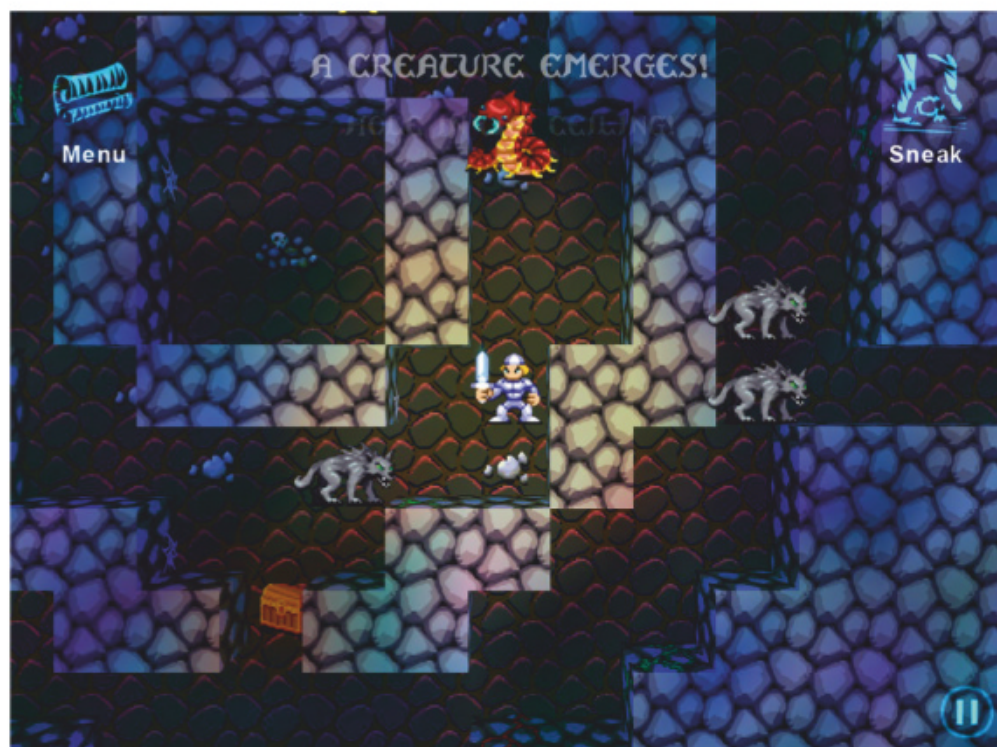


Unsurprisingly given the strength of the pitch, few developers have told GameClub no, though Hodapp admits some are caught off guard. "You get emails every now and again from people who want to play your game, but you can't really justify the cost of the updates. Then I come out of the blue and I'm like, 'Hey, let me solve all your problems for you!'" The only studios to say no have had imminent plans to revive their old games themselves. "It usually ends with, 'Thanks, but no thanks – but this is super cool, and I wish I'd known about you guys six months ago, because holy cow'."

longer financially sustainable; in some cases, the studios that made them had closed, or the talent involved moved on. "When I saw those games kind of slowly vanish, it was a point of major personal frustration to be on the editorial side and realise that the extent of the influence I had on these games disappearing was basically just to complain," Hodapp says. "It feels good when you spend all day working on that really scathing editorial – you get the perfect pull-quotes and the tweet's amazing and everything. But at best you get a bunch of people nodding in agreement with you as they read. At the end of the day, that sort of stuff isn't going to bring any of those games back."

Now he's trying to put that right. Hodapp left the EIC's chair at Touch Arcade and is now VP of business development for GameClub, a new company whose sole modus operandi is getting dead games back on the App Store. It was co-founded last year by Dan Sherman, a veteran of companies including EA and Tilting Point and the operation's business brain, and Oliver Pedersen, its tech wizard, formerly the director of engineering at Yahoo Games and CTO of PlayerScale. They, like Hodapp, had tired of seeing amazing, often important games disappear from view. Sherman, meanwhile, remembered his formative gaming experiences on the NES and Atari 2600, and compared them to the pop-up ad barrages and IAP nagging so common in the mobile games his young children played. Enough was enough. Their pitch to developers is simple: give us your source code, and we'll put it back on the App Store.

Their solution is case by case, bespoke and done by hand by a small team of engineers in Copenhagen (Pedersen is based there, Sherman in New York, and Hodapp in Chicago). Currently, the team is focusing attention on early iOS games, made at a time when there were fewer development technologies available to small shops than there are today; no two games'



***Sword Of Fargoal* is comfortably the oldest game in the initial GameClub catalogue – it was first released for Commodore 64 back in 1982. Its iOS version was released in 2009, and died with the launch of iOS 11**

problems will be identical, but once GameClub fixes a certain bug in one Cocos2d game, for example, it will be prepared the next time a variant of it comes up. Many of the developers behind those early classics believe their games to be lost causes. Kepa Auwae, creator of the 2D platformer *Hook Champ*, firmly believed that his game, released in 2009, could only be made playable for modern devices after a complete rewrite. He would get emails from fans asking him to bring it back. Touch Arcade called for it to be brought back, too. However, Auwae thought it as good as impossible.

"That game was very much a product of its day," Hodapp says. "When it was made, no one ever thought that there might be an iPhone with a screen size that wasn't 320x480. The physics engine, the way the game rendered and all this other stuff were all locked to the idea that this is the screen size that everything the game is built on expects; there's no scaling up or anything like that." Auwae handed over the source code. Pedersen had it up and running,

and 90 per cent functional, within a day-and-a-half.

Hook Champ is GameClub's first release, going out for free to those who sign up for its early-access programme. Members will be sent a link to the game in TestFlight, the Apple software used for beta-testing games and apps, but eventually *Hook Champ* and the fixed-up games that follow (one per week, at least initially) will be restored in all their former glory to the App Store. If Hodapp is coy about exactly how that will work – we know nothing about the price, the revenue share, whether previous owners will have to pay again or if, as seems logical, this will ultimately involve a subscription of some kind – he's honest enough to admit it's because they don't even know themselves yet. "I guess it's kind of a startup-y thing to do: build the product first and make sure everyone likes it, then figure the rest out later. But that's where we're at right now. I genuinely believe there's a huge audience of people that are going to love these games, and as that comes to fruition, I think the rest will just become obvious."



Early signs are certainly encouraging. When we speak, GameClub is little more than a landing page with a call for email signups, and an op-ed Hodapp wrote for the website *gamesindustry.biz*. "The interest has vastly exceeded even what I laid out as our best-case scenario for the announcement of the company," he says. "It's thrown us for a loop as far as what the ceiling for all this might be because I was expecting dozens of signups, and instead got thousands."

Hook Champ is a logical starting point for the company, a game Hodapp championed in Touch Arcade's early years and one its developer thought was beyond saving. The rest of the first wave of games has been tightly curated, if not for their profile or success at the time then for how important they have become since release. There's *Gasketball*, co-developed by Greg Wohlwend, better known these days for the likes of *Ridiculous Fishing*,

"Mobile games can have a beginning, a middle and an end; that really great sense of accomplishment"

Tumbleseed and the briefly world-conquering *Threes*. Before he shot to fame with *Monument Valley* and then *Florence*, Ken Wong made *Hackycat*, a 'dork sport' in which you play keepy-ups with kittens. *Incoboto* was made by Fluttermind, a developer whose YouTube channel has 26 subscribers. Designed by *Fable* co-creator Dene Carter, it was nominated for a Bafta.

This is where Hodapp comes in, using that decade of experience at the reporting coalface to, if all goes to plan, assemble a growing library of lost, forgotten or overlooked App Store classics. GameClub will not undo the apocalypse entirely, but it can at least put some of it right. In doing so, the team hopes, it can also repair the image of mobile gaming, which after such a bright start has come to embody the very worst the medium has to offer. That may not be true, per se, but it is certainly the perception, and by adhering

to strict criteria – it must be a paid-for game, have aged well, and have either been successful at the time or have historical importance today – perhaps GameClub can put that right, one loving, hand-made restoration at a time.

"It kills me seeing people just have this blanket attitude of, 'Well, all mobile games are just shit,' or at best concede that, like, only one per cent of mobile games are good," Hodapp says. "But when you look at the numbers of that, there have been so many games released that if you consider one per cent of mobile games to be the 'good' ones, that means there are more good mobile games than there are games in the entirety of the PlayStation 2 game library. What we're excited to raise awareness of is the fact that mobile games can have a beginning, a middle and an end; that really great sense of accomplishment when the credits roll, and all that stuff. Mobile doesn't have to be what most people know it as, which is these games that are intentionally designed to just be played forever. That's not the way things have to be." ■

Released in 2011, *Legendary Wars* is a cheery blend of RTS, RPG and tower defence

Plug and play

How Lego is looking to the videogame industry to develop a new kind of physical/digital play

For kids, building (and breaking) stuff will never go out of style. First it was *Minecraft*; then came *Fortnite*. But the foundation upon which those games were constructed was one of Danish plastic. Lego, of course, is bulletproof – well, conceptually at least – but that doesn't mean that its designers aren't exploring new means of developing its iconic toy for a modern audience. The roles have been reversed: Lego is looking to games as inspiration for a new way to play.

Its latest project, more than two years in the making and launching this summer, is Lego Hidden Side. It's a series of Lego sets designed to work in conjunction with augmented reality. Scan the finished build with your smartphone camera via the free app, and Apple's ARKit

2.0 technology will overlay animations and interactive elements. We watch a blocky graveyard spring to life on-screen – a gnarled tree flailing its branches eerily, an angel statue flapping its wings – as senior product lead

Murray Andrews plays and talks us through it.

"At Lego, we're always exploring new ways to play, and the digital side of play is something we're interested in," he says. "Lots of kids play videogames because they like the challenge and the social interactivity side of it. It's about how we can bring in these elements into a physical/digital product. Many of the current AR games on the market are really just digital levels laid on a table – what we're trying to create is a new way of playing where the physical world actually matters and affects the digital world, rather than the opposite."

Each Hidden Side set makes up part

of the haunted town of Newbury: playing alongside the characters of Jack, Parker and app creator Professor JB, players exorcise the sets by playing minigames to find and collect various types of ghosts or 'studs' to upgrade ghost-hunting gear – as well as defeat each set's boss ghost.

This isn't Lego trying to replace the trusty brick, but rather an attempt to fuse physical and digital play in a more elegant way. "We don't just want to create another game where kids are interacting with the screen: we always want to bring them back to the model." Interacting with glowing 'points of possession' brings up a scanner on the phone for players to use while physically turning statues and lifting coffin lids in the model to uncover bricks.

The app uses colour recognition on these to conjure the ghosts – if there's one hiding there at that point, that is.

The set designers wanted to ensure that players always have "one hand in each realm", as Murray puts it, which had its challenges. "They really

had to change their way of thinking for this kind of fluid play. If you've got a phone in one hand, you need to be able to interact with the model one-handed, when for some functions you'd normally need two." Playtesting proved enlightening as well: "We're having to break some of the conventions that kids have ingrained in them. They're always going to tap on the phone, so it was interesting to try and design flows and processes that move them away from that." For Lego, it's critical to champion physical play, which helps develop motor skills and emotional intelligence through

EXTRA LIFE

This is not the first toy-powered Lego game, of course: *Lego Dimensions* was a charming idea that sadly went the way of most other games in the toys-to-life genre. You'd think Lego would be wary of developing something similar, but Andrews explains that the team doesn't see Hidden Side as part of the same space. "It conjures up a specific type of gameplay, I think, to which Hidden Side is very different. You're right that the data is showing that that sort of play – *Starlink* for instance, which is a great experience in some respects – arguably isn't doing as well as it could. But that's not to say that connected play and physical/digital play, having one hand in each world, is not something that kids want. And we believe that they want that, and that Lego Hidden Side offers something new to what kids have had up to this point."

roleplay – but incorporating a digital layer of interactivity and progression is a way to attract a modern audience.

And to keep

bringing them back. Hidden Side is planned to be a 'product as a service'. "It's that 'games as a service' mentality where after we launch the product and the app, we're going to continue to update the experience," Andrews says. On Hallowe'en, for example, the app might ping an alert to tempt a player to break out their toyset again and see which limited-time ghosts have come to town.

"Games, particularly mobile games now, are a constantly evolving product," he says. "That's key to what we're doing here. Traditionally, you buy a Lego set, and you build it and play with it and then you break it apart. The beauty of it is it has that evolution intrinsically, because you can continue to build new things with it. But what we're trying to do with Hidden Side is create a mixed-reality experience that continues with the theme and story." And while the AR tech isn't advanced enough to support players mixing and matching sets just yet (the app will only recognise and run the game from a mostly correctly-built model), Andrews hopes that "maybe further down the line that's something that we can bring into the experience."

Hidden Side is part of Lego's grand plan for the future: we'll see it develop into 2020 and beyond as Andrews and team continue to explore their more integrated approach to physical/digital play. And while there's certainly room for improvement on the digital side of its offering, Lego Hidden Side already has one advantage over *Fortnite*: you can't discreetly Hoover up a videogame if the noise starts to get annoying. ■

The sets aren't just designed to digitally morph via AR, but also physically transform. This schoolhouse can be made monstrous in a few quick moves



The folder generation

With the **Labo VR Kit**, Nintendo returns to virtual reality after a quarter-century away

At E3 2012, three Nintendo executives posed for a photo that became a classic. Standing by a 4x4 outside the LA Convention Centre, Reggie Fils-Aimé is shaking Shigeru Miyamoto's hand, and Satoru Iwata has rested his own right palm over the top. All three are smiling. Internet wags christened it the Triforce, which is probably about as flattered as Fils-Aimé has ever been.

The outgoing president of Nintendo Of America – he leaves on April 15, to be replaced by the immaculately named Doug Bowser – is no game developer. The cult of personality around him ('My body is ready' and the rest of it) started out as ironic and became affectionate, which is some achievement for a man who spoke in bullet points, parroting marketing lines that had come down the pipe from NCL. The rare occasions on which he gave interviews were masterclasses in the art of saying nothing while seeming to talk a lot. Yet, perhaps as a parting gift, an announcement for Switch has made one of Fils-Aimé's interview responses appear insightful. Folks, he finally said something.

At E3 last year, he was asked about Nintendo's stance on VR. "We have knowledge of the technical space, and we've been experimenting with it for a long, long time," he said. "What we believe is that, in order for this technology to move forward, you need to make it fun, and you need to make it social. Based on what I've seen to date, it's not fun, and it's not social. It's just tech."

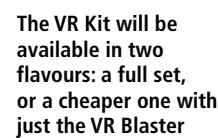
Enter Nintendo Labo: VR Kit, a range of constructible cardboard toys that marks Nintendo's return to virtual reality almost

25 years after the failed launch of Virtual Boy, and that fulfils Fils-Aimé's stated criteria. The social requirement has been met by the simple virtue of there being no headset. You'll build a series of Toy-Cons into which the Switch must be inserted, and then hold them up to your eyes, with no strap to keep them in place. Once you're done, there's no sweaty HMD to take off; you just hand the Toy-Con to the person sitting next to you. How odd, and yet perfect, that the answer to Nintendo's scepticism of the most futuristic gaming technology on the market should be the View-Master, which turns 80 this year.

And fun? Well. This too has its roots in the strapless design. If playing with a VR Toy-Con involves holding it up to your head, then the Toy-Con itself must also be the handles and the input device. So there is a VR Blaster, the barrel protruding from your nose, one hand on the trigger and the other at the muzzle to keep it steady. The Toy-Con Camera repurposes Joy-Con inputs as shutter buttons and focus dials.

The Toy-Con Elephant essentially gives you a cardboard trunk to swing around. There's a bird, and you look up its bottom for some reason. On it goes.

Yet the real thing that makes this latest Labo pack social and fun is, of course, Labo itself. Its projects are meant to be built with company; likewise the minigames and Garage experiments that follow a completed build. More than anything else Nintendo has yet done on Switch, it calls back to and continues on the promise of the Wii and DS era: something that can be enjoyed by people of any age irrespective of their level of



The VR Kit will be available in two flavours: a full set, or a cheaper one with just the VR Blaster

gaming experience. And, just as those consoles introduced new generations to your favourite hobby, so might Labo be the thing that gets VR into sceptics' hands.

There has been much debate about Labo's value for money: naysayers point out that it is exorbitantly priced for something made primarily from cardboard. Yet it suddenly feels pretty cheap. Sure, Google Cardboard, on the face of it this new Labo kit's closest cousin, can be had for less. Likewise the raft of cheap and cheerful headsets into which you can slot a smartphone. But none of those involve a build process as satisfying as anything Lego has ever mustered, bundled homebrew development software, or a silly little game or two made by one of the greatest developers of all time.

So, just as this causes us to find, just in time, a new level of appreciation for Nintendo Of America's outgoing president, so the VR Kit demands a reexamination of what Labo represents. It is still today, as it was before, a fun little toy that brings families together in ways that Switch might otherwise struggle to. Yet it is also slowly transforming into a testbed for the side of Nintendo that we find most fascinating, and which we don't see so much of these days. The one unafraid to try new things, to take risks, to be silly, and put out products no other company in the industry would even consider, much less actually take on.

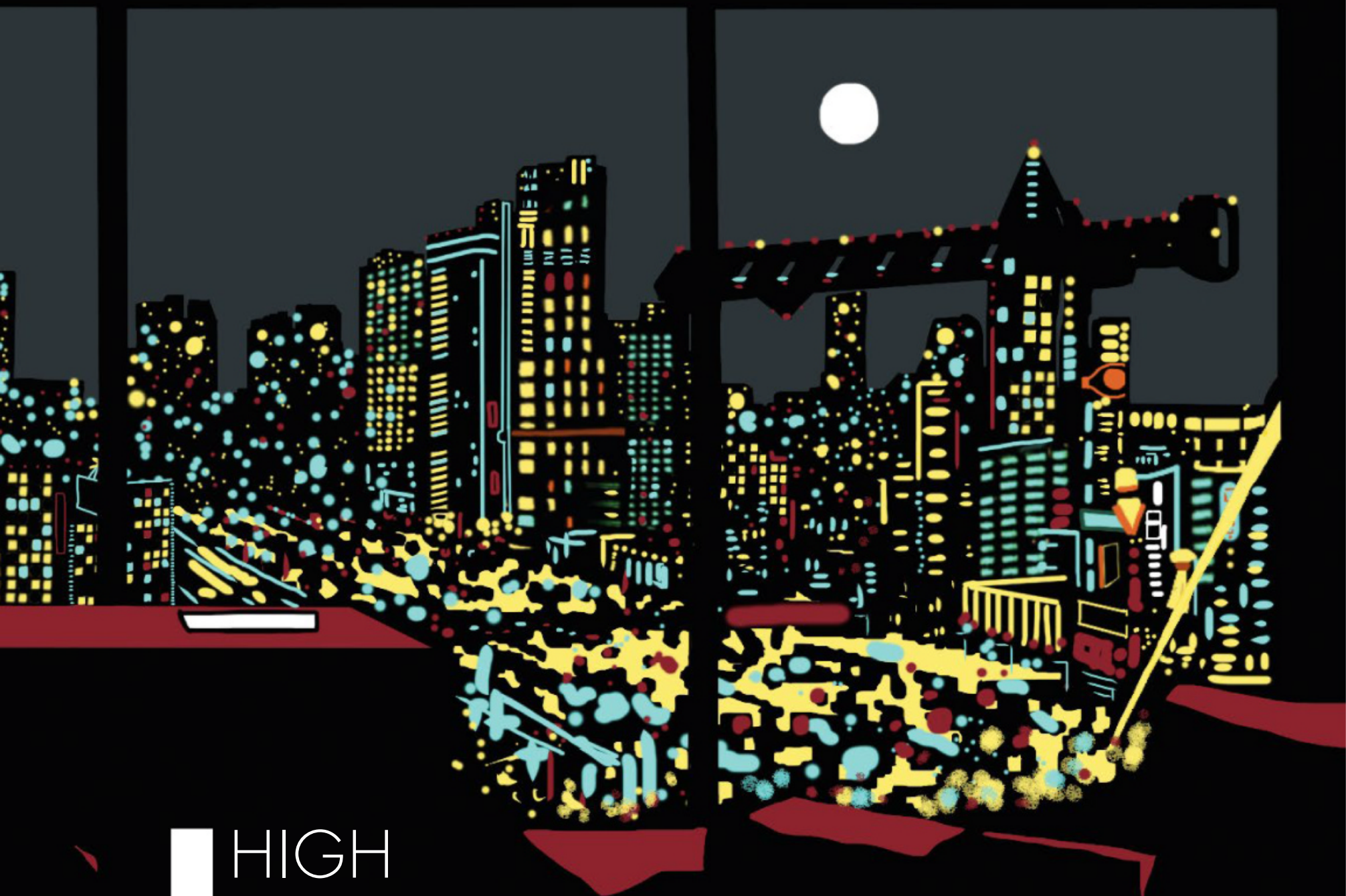
It is a virtual reality elephant made out of cardboard, for heaven's sake. And perhaps it will turn out to be rubbish. But as the industry grows more conservative amid the sense that you are only ever one failure away from being out of business, Labo's existence remains something to be cheered. And if nothing else, it means Reggie Fils-Aimé leaves with a legacy made up of more than just memes. ■



KNOWLEDGE PHOENIX SPRINGS

"Every time I unlocked a new technical possibility, I rebuilt the entire art style," studio founder Florian Tanat says. "The only thing that stayed consistent was Eleanor's drawings"





HIGH CONTRAST

Calligram Studios' captivating noir sketches
out a murder mystery in chiaroscuro

Somehow, under the blazing glare of a desert sun, dark secrets are hiding. *Phoenix Springs* is a point-and-click adventure about a detective investigating the strange death of her younger brother. The art style takes its cues from the works of graphic novelists Shaun Tan and Frank Miller – while the majority of the game is three-dimensional, all the illustrations and details are drawn in 2D before being integrated back into the 3D world. “We wanted a noir aesthetic, and that means hard black shadows,” art director **Eleanor Summers** says, explaining how shrewd use of fake shadows helps draw the player’s eye to where it’s needed. “These look fantastic in dark cities – in a bright desert oasis, not so much. Part of the fun was figuring out how to make these two things work together.” Indeed, the disparities between the city and desert settings, and a balmy paradise and the terrible things it’s disguising, are exactly what makes *Phoenix Springs* so striking and unsettling. You’ll be able to experience it for yourself on PC late this year. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I don't do 'reviews' because **everyone enjoys different things**. Modern reviews should be watching streamers, doing the demo, listening to what your gaming friends think – and if it seems like something you will enjoy then great."

Mike Ybarra reveals the real reason behind Xbox's slack firstparty schedule – if you don't release anything, you don't have to worry about those pesky reviews



"We're not going to withhold technology from institutions that we have **elected in democracies to protect** the freedoms we enjoy."

Is Microsoft CEO **Satya Nadella** defending his firm's decision to make HUDs for the US military, or pitching a Tom Clancy novel?



"I do not condone child **pornography, white supremacy, or racism** in any shape or form. I am terribly sorry for the shortsightedness of my decision"

THQ Nordic's **Philipp Brock** realises an 8Chan AMA is the worst idea anyone has ever had

"We are scrabbling around in the dark here, lighting little matches and seeing tiny bits of the pictures around us. **They have flashlights.**"

York St John University professor **David Zendle**, author of papers on the links between loot boxes and gambling, wants the industry to share its data. Good luck



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Daytona Championship USA SDXL
Manufacturer Sega

These days, if the maker of a console game wants another bite of the sales cherry months or years after release, it has plenty of options. A Game Of The Year edition, perhaps, with all bundled DLC. A big expansion full of new things to do and quality-of-life fixes. If the game's a generation or more old, there's always the trusty remaster. In the arcade, however, things are a little different. How do you get your ageing game back in the coin-op spotlight?

Daytona Championship USA SDXL is a re-release of the arcade racer Sega released back in 2016. The game itself is unchanged – not that there's any shame in that, given the pedigree of the *Daytona* name. Even the cabinet has been seen before, its technology used to power *Showdown SDXL*, a fancier version of another coin-op racer that launched back in 2014. The hook is what Sega calls the "pivot motion platform"; essentially, the cockpit is on a pivot and so can actually turn left and right according to steering-wheel inputs, rather than simply rock you from side to side.

Elsewhere, cabinet screen size has been increased to 65", though they're 1080p displays, making for a questionable benefit given how close you sit. There's also an "authentic" dashboard with working buttons and dials.

This version is exclusive for now to a new Lucky Strike-branded arcade in Chicago. The next time we're passing through O'Hare, we may ask for an overnight layover.





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My Favourite Game

Denis Karimani

The artist known as Remute on making music with Sega Mega Drives and the enduring appeal of retro games

Videogames have been an influence on Denis 'Remute' Karimani's career since his debut EP Hypnoconsole in 2002. Two years ago his album *Limited* was released on 3.5-inch floppy disk – and his latest project, *Technoptimistic*, comes on a Mega Drive cartridge. Here, he discusses his love of Sega's 16bit system, and why niche formats make for more rewarding listening.

What are your very earliest memories of playing videogames?

I got a Commodore 64 when I was five years old – that was my first entry into the gaming world. Right after that I got a Nintendo Entertainment System, and when I was eight I got a Mega Drive. That was the most powerful gaming experience of my childhood because of the graphics, and of course the music. I actually had the feeling that I was in the minority with a Sega console in Germany – I was the cool kid with the Mega Drive and every kid wanted to come over and play.

Was it the Mega Drive that first sparked your interest in music?

It was indeed my first step into electronic music – my first *conscious* step, at least. The Super Nintendo tried to emulate real instruments like guitar and piano but on the Mega Drive, everything had this unique electronic sound. The music had a huge impact on me. Especially the music of *Streets Of Rage 2* – Yuzo Koshiro's soundtrack was probably my first conscious step into house music. It's still actually my favourite videogame soundtrack of all time.

DISK JOCKEY
Remute's work on 2017's *Limited* helped him adapt his style to realise his dream of programming music for the Mega Drive – a 3.5-inch floppy disk, after all, has even less storage space than a 4MB cartridge. "It really forced me to concentrate on the essential parts of a song," he says. "When you're restricted to certain limitations, you have to focus on the parts that are most important and delete everything that isn't. It changed my musical direction a lot but I'm really happy with the result."



Can you talk us through the process of recording *Technoptimistic*?

The music was written on a program on PC but then it was transferred into a language compatible with the Mega Drive by a friend called Kabuto. He's a very popular coder in the demo scene. He made a demo called *Overdrive* that showed off special capabilities of the Mega Drive that no one had seen before. The music runs off the cartridge – it gets generated in realtime when you put the module into the Mega Drive.

Did that limitation change your approach to composition?

I've produced techno music for over 15 years now and I always recorded my music into digital audio workstations. Today you have 5TB hard drives, but when you work on the Mega Drive, you only have enough for very short samples – the rest has to be programmed to be played in realtime.

It sounds like a bit of a dream project.

Yeah, I think I always wanted to make music with the FM chip of the Mega Drive – certainly since the beginning of my career. And I always want to make music that's adventurous to play because I see people getting bored playing music on Spotify. It all gets so *normal*, you know? When you have to put a cartridge into a Mega Drive... well, you first have to track down a working Mega Drive (laughs). It makes listening to music more adventurous when you have to *do* something for it.

The feeling when you can finally listen to the music is rewarding for the user. And that's something that really turns me on.

Do you still find time to play?

I actually have all current-gen consoles – Xbox One, PS4 and Switch – but I think I enjoy playing retro games more. On the Mega Drive, the music is a really big part of it – and it's also the fact that you can play through a game in one sitting. Like, if you turn on *Streets Of Rage 2* you can play through it in two hours and you're happy. But if you play stuff like *Skyrim* or *Fallout* or *Red Dead Redemption* you have to play for weeks or months and then you still may be not through.

Which modern games do you enjoy?

I really like modern scrolling shooters, such as *Raiden V* for PS4, and I also really like some

Japanese stuff like [2D platformer] *Rabi-Ribi*. I tend to like obscure games that blend pixel art with modern programming. I'm not a particular fan of triple-A games like *Red Dead Redemption*.

So is *Streets Of Rage 2* your favourite?

Absolutely. I think it's still my favourite. It's so catchy. You turn it on, you hear the chords of the music in the first stage and then you really get into the gameplay because it's so well-programmed, it's so well-balanced and the pixel art is timeless. The contrast between beating people up and this happy rave music... it still blows my mind. ■

As well as Yuzo Koshiro's work, Karimani has fond memories of soundtracks by Tommy Tallarico, such as *Aladdin* and *RoboCop Versus The Terminator*



WEBSITE

Mall Rats, Vidiots and Addicts

bit.ly/antivgpropaganda
Cat DeSpira's essay explaining why *Pac-Man* arcade players tend to grip the left side of the machine (complete with lovely evidentiary photos of the wear on the cabinet) has been doing the rounds as of late – and deservedly so. But her WordPress blog, *Retro Bitch*, is full of equally fascinating articles. 'Mall Rats, Vidiots and Addicts' is a treat: it's an analysis of negative attitudes towards videogames in the '80s, accompanied by brilliantly creepy caricatures of hopeless arcadeheads that DeSpira has managed to unearth. It ends on a giddy note about how videogames have gone on to prove the naysayers wrong – though there would have been room for a meditation on how nastier modern sensibilities such as microtransactions have ensured the moral panic continues to this day.



VIDEO

The First Levels Of 2D Mario Games

bit.ly/mariolevels
'Nintendo in excellent game design shocker' is hardly a headline, we know. But Ceave Gaming's video on the first level of every 2D Mario game is comprehensive, displaying the series' evolution over the years – and what has ensured its continued success. The clever visual communication of the grid system of levels, the subverting of player expectations in sequels and how developments in hardware were used to refine ideas instead of reinvent them: it's all here, explained by a player with such mastery over the games that he's beaten some without collecting a single coin.

WEB GAME

Mobius

bit.ly/mobiusgame

Setting a platformer on a series of Möbius strips is a sharp idea, and 19-year-old creator Adam Pye executes it with aplomb for the most part. You're cast as a wonderfully gormless jumpman, chasing coins scattered across both sides of twisting, contiguous bands that challenge your understanding of the cardinal directions. It begins to feel natural to rotate each stage to keep your character in view as you hop over spike pits and grab keys. Although a lack of checkpoints and the occasional strange hitbox repeatedly grate, there's a taste of more mechanical ideas in this demo – one level has you shrinking the course to make leaps more manageable, and another is a boss run against an all-seeing eye that almost reminds us of a *Super Meat Boy* showdown – that makes downloading the full game rather tempting.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

LIGHTING

Devil May Cry neon sign

bit.ly/DMCneon

They're mildly obnoxious, ludicrously expensive and we have absolutely no idea where we'd even put one, so obviously we must have one of these *Devil May Cry* neon signs. Capcom and Neon Creations have teamed up to make the decorative pieces, which range from 32cm to 47cm in height, come in blue or pink and can either be mounted on a wall or left free-standing. The recreation of *DMC5*'s in-game sign is easily the most stylish option, but costs an eye-watering £1,035. Presumably, hunting demons pays a lot more than making magazines – still, if you've somehow managed to make battling hellspawn a lucrative hobby, you can 'make an enquiry' at the provided address.



continue

Worth its weight

EA Motive founder Jade Raymond is Google's new VP of games

Renegade move

A new *Destiny* update offers players a narrative choice with consequences

Pull up stakes

Vivendi sells its final shares in Ubisoft. Congratulations, Yves and co

Slice of the market

Halo: The Master Chief Collection and *Reach* will come to PC...

quit

Golden days

EA joins Sony in dropping out of E3. We're feeling nostalgic already

Combo breaker

The *Anthem* pantomime continues with console crashes and damage-scaling bugs

Drip drip effect

Sakurai works with an IV when sick. The petition to make him take a proper holiday starts now

Pied off

...but 343 Industries doesn't need any more pizza deliveries, thanks

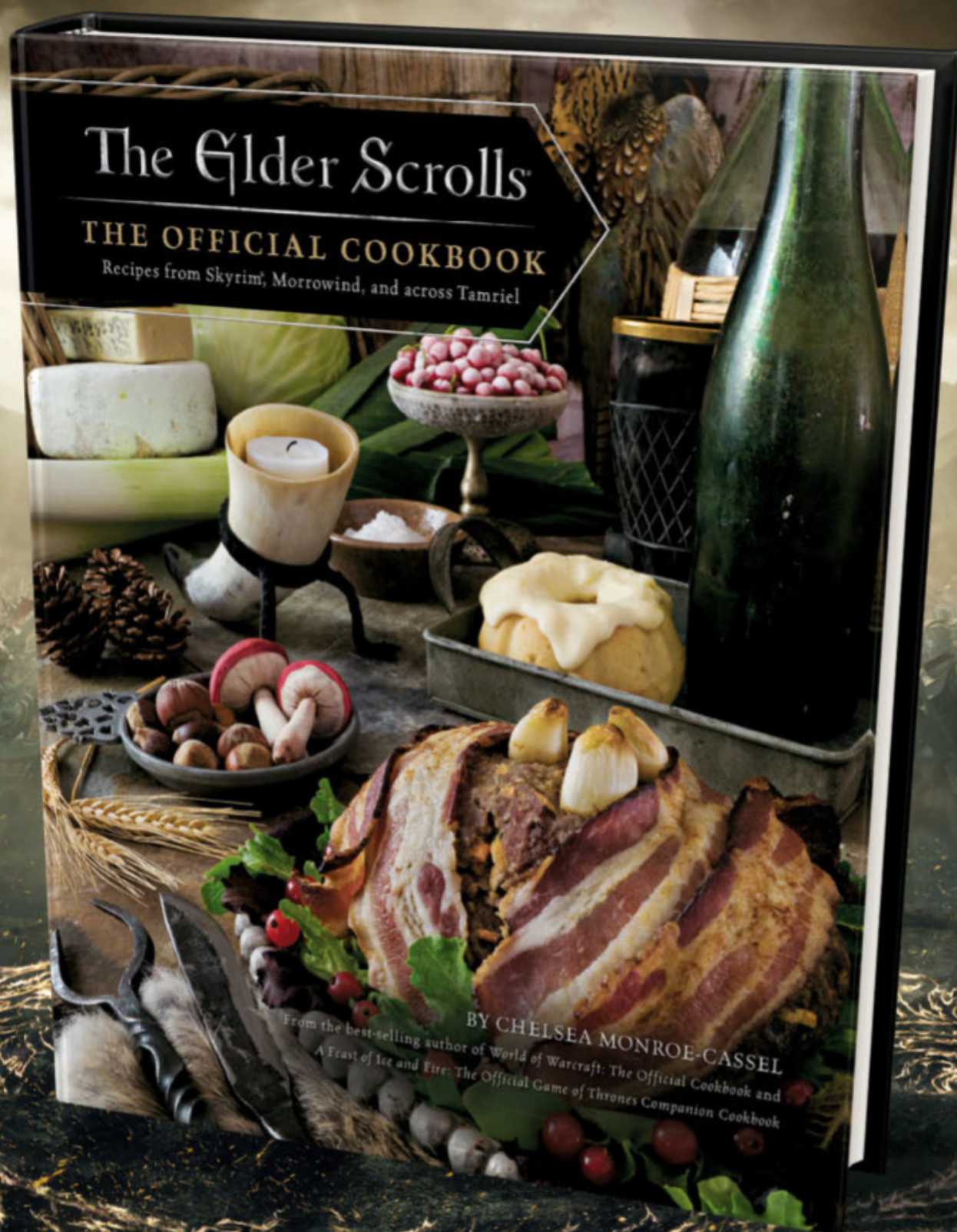


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DISPATCHES

MAY



Issue 330

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation®Plus

The world is yours

Steven Poole's piece on "interactive cinema" (E329) confirmed many of my thoughts around games which appear to offer you a choice while in essence boxing you in at every opportunity, but it made me think back to the exception to the rule, last year's *Detroit: Become Human* — a woefully underappreciated game because of its numerous defects. Yes the morals were clunky, the analogies to the civil rights movement were laid on so thick it should have come with a free trowel and there weren't very many shades of grey, but your choices genuinely affected the outcome of the game — from one of the bleakest endings I've ever come across in a videogame to others which were much more encouraging, and made you feel like you had been part of changing the (gaming) world into a better place than it was 12 hours ago.

Obviously it'd be cynical for a game so ostentatiously about free will to not allow the player the same freedom it espouses, but the ambitious narrative left you feeling like those choices you make throughout — whether to start a civil war or take a path of peaceful resistance, whether to be honest and open-eyed or distrustful and combative — really did matter. Not many studios, of course, have the resources to fund multiple branching paths which most people playing through the game once will never see, but Quantic Dream demonstrated the possibilities in this area, and in doing so they offered something beyond the "conservative and depressing" charge which Steven rightly levels against the bulk of the genre. In the future technological advances should allow smaller studios to carry this torch forward, although the most involving stories will still be the ones that stand the test of time, and some of them might even have happy endings.

Mark Whitfield

"The ambitious narrative left you feeling like those choices you make throughout really did matter"

We put this to Steven, but his reply went flying right over our heads as always. Have a year's PS Plus in lieu of his response.

Drop

When Netflix aired the first ever trailer for *Cloverfield: Paradox* and then ended it with an announcement that subscribers could stream it immediately, it felt like a moment. Regardless of the dubious quality of the film, it was a disruptive move that, just one year later, feels like becoming the norm.

At the time I mused how this could never happen in the big budget, preview-hungry world of videogames. A year after *Cloverfield*, up pops *Apex Legends* from nowhere and bags an **Edge** 9.

In the same month, *Crackdown 3* released.

There seems to be no danger of this troubling the higher boundaries of **Edge** scoring but it is notable, nonetheless, that it became available on Game Pass service on day one. Rare that a game of middling ratings would trouble my backlog, but if it's free on a service I already

subscribe to? Well, I might give it a go for an evening. The first one was fun after all.

Edge was a bit cheeky rating Game Pass as Xbox's third-best 'game' of 2018 but it neatly highlighted how much Microsoft trails Sony in firstparty exclusives. It will take some time to catch up, even with all the acquisitions. But if launching first- and thirdparty games day one on a Netflix-style subscription platform commercially works for publishers, Game Pass could be the biggest disruptor of this generation and will impact how we consume games in future.

Could we ever move to a world where we don't gorge on previews, but eagerly await emails arriving out of the blue about games we can play immediately at no extra cost? "Coming tomorrow to PS Plus: *Bloodborne 2* — A Sony Exclusive" sounds rather good.

Ivan Harding



www.facebook.com/
edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with
fellow **Edge** readers

It certainly does, though it would require a sea change in the industry's traditional rhythm for it to happen, and this big ship turns slow. And please don't use the phrase 'Bloodborne 2'. It makes us feel all funny.

Paid in full

How did *Telling Lies* conjure an uncomfortable truth about my favourite pastime? Hoping to make up for missing *Her Story*, I was glad to see Sam Barlow's newest game profiled in **E330**. My enthusiasm took a nosedive, however, after Jen Simpkins revealed the game's new mechanic: video scrubbing. I'm a video editor, and the thought of scrubbing video in a game makes me queasy. It's an unpleasant reminder that, for me, work and play both involve staring at a screen and operating a computer. At any rate, breaking open loot boxes relieves the stress of filling up a timeline, so I'll continue telling myself the lie that gaming is a refreshing alternative to real life.

Pat Connor

Hey, you want to try playing games for a living, then going home and enjoying one. (Seriously, do you want to try? We'll swap. A dark, quiet editing suite sounds great.)

Scenario

I would respectfully disagree with Mr Robert August de Meijer's opinion on *Bandersnatch* [**E330**]. I thought it was a brilliantly acted and cleverly written narrative and I was hooked from beginning to end.

The main reason it works so well for me is because it feels like a classic Black Mirror episode – a delightfully dark tale interwoven with hilarious meta-references and totally in keeping with the sustained existential theme. It combines the '80s vibe with the current, just out of reach of the protagonist Stefan. Of course, the illusion of choice is the major theme of the episode, which reveals itself as the interactive movie goes on. But it isn't always quite as pointless as it seems: one paradoxical ending changes the scope of the

narrative in a happy-yet-sad way that only a writer as talented as Brooker, working with great actors and a director at the top of their game, could do.

Sure, interactive programmes that operate in this meta style are unsustainable long-term, but as an experimental and fascinating hour-and-a-half of television I think it works wonderfully in conjunction with the rest of the episodes and as an ode to gaming as a whole, and I think there is excellent yet intelligent fun to be had here. It may not be your typical Choose Your Own Adventure story, but that's the point; it's something cleverer, more subversive and crucially more entertaining than that. It may not be a completely fresh concept, but in execution it went over and above what I had expected. And I must admit, I found playing on the console with the controller tensely vibrating particularly engrossing.

Owen Hiscock

We don't expect developers – or writers and directors – to nail something new at the first time. But thank heavens they're trying, hmm?

Just a friend

I'm so happy to see *Shenmue III* reach your hallowed front cover. As a fan from the very beginning, it's truly been a long and strange journey. From the dark post-Dreamcast days to that fateful E3 2015 conference, just finding a scrap of information on the future of *Shenmue* was akin to finding buried treasure. As games have gotten bigger and more bloated, there have been fewer large-scale games based on an auteur; especially ones with a positive reception (Molyneux and Cage maybe), so it is with excitement and trepidation to see if Suzuki-san can pull it off. I have faith he will.

The most heartwarming bit of the feature was the last comment on how much *Shenmue* means to the fans. In this age of loot boxes, fanboy-ism and constant negativity, the thought that a passion project is back from the dead with love and passion from the fans and its creator is truly a wonderful thing.

Benji Copeman

Let's organise

Activision's layoff of 800 workers hit me hard. For the nth time (remember the Telltale debacle, Rockstar's working conditions, etc?) I realised how blessed I am to not have pursued a career in videogame development. Luckily, a couple of commentators have started writing about labour unions. As far as I know, unions are not that powerful in the gaming industry.

It strikes me as odd that gamers revere lead designers like gods, and revile EA Games like they're ExxonMobil, but they are amazingly silent when it comes to those who actually get the dirty work done. Calls for boycotting Activision are due to things like releasing *Diablo* on mobile, not the fact that hundreds of people won't be receiving paycheques while the company makes record profits. I've come across folks who argue that unions might actually cripple the industry, or lead to jobs being shipped offshore. Maybe I'm wrong, but I can't help interpreting this as a lack of understanding.

I believe there's something more inherent going on here. Videogame culture is a safe space from the struggles of real life. In turn, we tend to wilfully ignore the ugly parts where we might have to invest some emotional labour into. Call me a dreamer, but I enjoy imagining an alternative reality where game developers weren't in constant fear of the crunch, where they could finish a 40-year career, where they didn't find themselves scurrying for their next job over and over again. This can be our industry, by and for the players. But in order for it to be that way, we have to treat gaming culture as something more than just playtime.

Robert August de Meijer

Unions may well spell disaster, but the game industry won't know for sure until it tries, and stories like these are now frequent enough that it is probably time to try. Art is passion and passion is sacrifice, but exploitation is another matter, and this industry, like much of modern life, needs to feel more sustainable. If you're reading this and doing something about it all, let us know how we can help. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Back in 1998 the US Navy cruiser USS Yorktown suffered a complete engine failure off the coast of Virginia. It was “dead in the water” for two hours and 45 minutes. Eventually it had to be towed back to harbour. Embarrassing, but not – as it would have been in a combat zone – multiply fatal. The Yorktown had been a testbed for the Navy’s Smart Ship project, which aimed to use networked computers aboard vessels to reduce the number of people needed to crew them. This ‘smart’ ship was so smart because it was running, er, Windows NT. One sailor accidentally entered a zero into an input field and the system attempted to divide by zero, causing a buffer overrun and somehow corrupting the entire database. Bye bye, propulsion. Even so, despite wide consensus among IT pros that UNIX-based systems would be more robust, a version of Windows 2000 that became colloquially known as “Windows for Warships” was installed over the next decade on both US and UK fleets. Feel any safer yet?

My point here is not to rag on Microsoft particularly, but this history is relevant when we consider the recent rebellion among MS employees over the prospect of selling Kinect-derived AR headsets to the US Army. The Hololens was built in the hope that it would be used by architects, trainee surgeons or Mars rover operators. So when Microsoft announced that it had won a \$480m contract with the Army to provide 100,000 Hololens sets for training and battlefield use in the IVAS (Integrated Visual Augmentation System) project, the idealistic engineers were understandably troubled. The kit, the Army announced, would “increase lethality by enhancing the ability to detect, decide and engage before the enemy”. But that was not what its inventors thought they were making.

So the Hololens workers wrote an open letter to Brad Smith and Satya Nadella, demanding that Microsoft cancel the contract. “We refuse to create technology for warfare and oppression”, they said; “we do



There is no simple way out of what General Eisenhower warned was the “military-industrial complex”

not want to become war profiteers”. They’d been conned: “We did not sign up to develop weapons,” they wrote, “and we demand a say in how our work is used.” This contract, they argued, was something new. “While the company has previously licensed tech to the US Military, it has never crossed the line into weapons development. With this contract, it does. The application of Hololens within the IVAS system is designed to help people kill.”

Well, yes, but providing an operating system to run warships is also helping people kill: that is what warships are for. This is not to dismiss the Microsoft employees’ concerns,

but only to point out that there is no simple way out of what General Eisenhower warned was the “military-industrial complex”. MS workers have previously complained about the possibility that their AI products might be used by US immigration forces, or that their company might bid on a military cloud-services contract. Elsewhere in the wider world of capitalism, you might design a new kind of waterproof fabric, only to discover that the military has used it for uniforms, to help people kill in comfort. Advances in trauma medicine are used on the battlefield, to help people survive and kill another day. And we all use the fruits of “defence”, ie warmaking, technology every day, from the Internet itself on downwards.

What is particularly piquant in the employees’ open letter is their distasteful reference to electronic entertainment. When used by the military, they argue, Hololens will work “by turning warfare into a simulated ‘videogame’, further distancing soldiers from the grim stakes of war and the reality of bloodshed.” It would be an argument for another time to ask why distancing soldiers in this way is not a good thing – for their own mental health and operational efficiency. For now it’s fair to say that the prospect of “distancing” is a horse that bolted long ago, with the invention of aerial bombing, if not firearms themselves.

The game industry itself has a long history of collaboration with the military, from a souped-up version of the 1980s arcade game *Battlezone* that was used for tank training onwards. Many US soldiers on deployment play FPS games in their downtime: aren’t those very games also, in a way, helping them to kill, by enabling them to blow off steam and relax? The Hololens rebels have put their finger on a real problem, but they are hugely underestimating the scale of it. And nothing will change until we acknowledge that we are all implicated.

Steven Poole’s *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

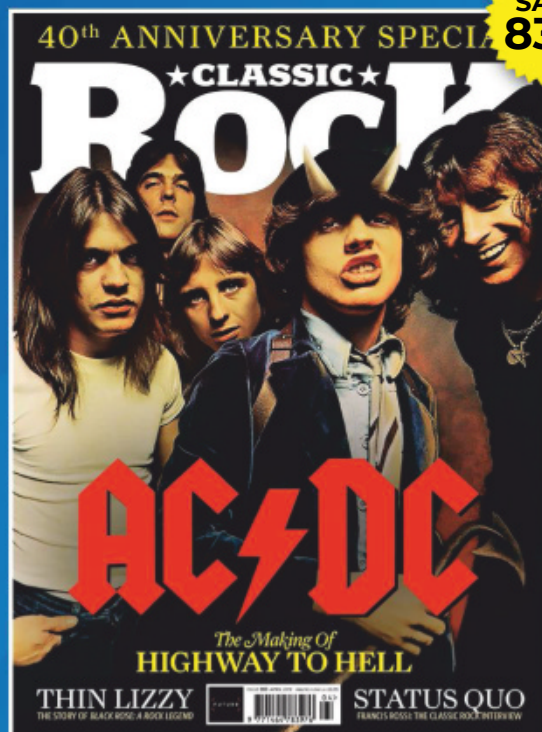
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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

The sun came out last week and Drake's Nice For What came up on Spotify, prompting a sensation I don't normally feel in February: cor, I can't wait for E3. Every year, as soon as it's warm enough for me to roll down the car window and crank the volume, thoughts inevitably turn to Los Angeles in June. E3's been changing steadily over the past couple of years. This year it seems likely to change even more. The way some people are talking about it, it could even be the last one.

EA started doing its own thing with the Play event in 2016, and Microsoft also part-quitted the conference last year. But both companies understood they couldn't *really* abandon E3. The first EA Play was crammed into a former hotel just around the corner from the LA Convention Centre; last year the Xbox operation moved into the newly acquired Microsoft Theater that's just over the road. Both companies wanted to do their own thing, but understood that they still had to fundamentally operate on E3's terms: to be in Los Angeles during that one magical week when the eyes of the global game industry, and all its observers and supporters, were fixed on a single place. Microsoft and EA weren't at E3, except they were.

This year will be different, with Sony quitting the show entirely: no press conference, no booth, no nothing. Shawn Layden, CEO of SIE Worldwide Studios, has in a roundabout way blamed E3 itself for the PlayStation operation skipping the show, saying that the decision to let the hoi polloi through the doors in 2017 had dulled E3's focus. By straddling the divide between fan event and trade show, he said, E3 was "in the middle of the highway, and it's going to get hit by cars on both sides." In a later interview, after Sony had formally pulled out of E3 2019, he said it had become "a trade show without a lot of trade activity. The world has changed, but E3 hasn't necessarily changed with it."

Like EA and Microsoft, Layden here is trying to have it both ways. E3 has either



For all that E3 has become less relevant in a lot of ways, it remains the starting station of the industry's hype train

changed or it hasn't, and his pronouncements aren't especially helpful when you consider that what's *really* changed is that Sony has run out of games. The natural consequence of showing your hand as early as Sony has at E3 throughout this generation is that, at some point, you will run out of things to announce. Whatever games Sony has in development today for release in two or three years are being made for a console it hasn't announced yet. Its E3 line-up has dwindled over the past couple of years; this year, it pretty much has nothing. While there's absolutely sound logic in not unduly raising expectations,

Layden's attempt to pin this on E3, rather than his own company, is at best misguided and, at worst, irresponsible.

He is right, though, that E3 has changed, and is struggling to find its place in the era of livestreaming, lightning-fast news cycles and developers and players being able to talk directly to each other without needing to go through the press. It became an event for the public long before the organisers let the general masses through the show's doors – ever since video cameras were first set up in the press conferences, this has been as much an event for the person on the street as the one in the industry. And retailers, who used E3 to help inform their buying decisions, don't really need it either – you don't have to fly all the way to Los Angeles to know that you need to order in lots of copies of the new *Mario* or *Elder Scrolls*. And while the meeting rooms around the periphery of the main halls were as busy as ever last year, E3 is hardly the only opportunity for the industry's moneymakers to sign contracts.

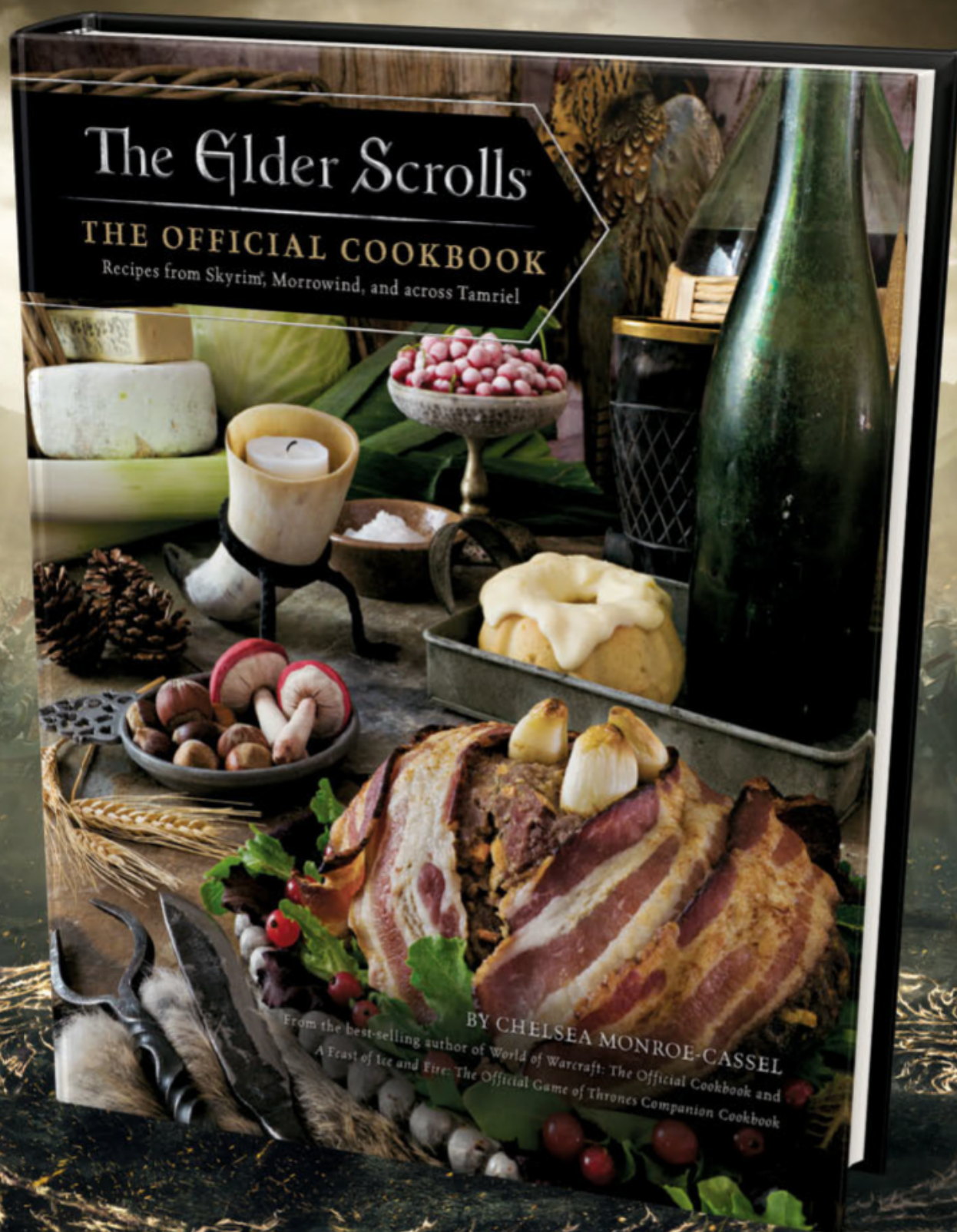
Layden, and the wider PlayStation operation, have made the calculation that if you don't have much to say you're better off out of the conversation; that they will look worse by turning up with not very much than by simply not turning up at all. I'm not sure I agree. For all that E3 has become less relevant in a lot of ways, it remains the starting station of the industry's hype train. GDC, PAX, Gamescom and all the rest are all well and good, but nothing lights a fire under this medium like that one special week in Los Angeles each year, where everything happens all at once, a joyous mess of excitement, anticipation and scandal. It remains the best opportunity we have for coverage, for networking, and for working out where the industry is headed. We still need it, and we still love it. And if you take away my annual chance for a week away from the kids in the California sunshine, I shall simply scream.

Nathan Brown is *Edge's* editor, and knows the layout of E3 like a *Dark Souls* level. Handy, since it often feels like one




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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

You'll know the Miyamoto quote by now: "A delayed game is eventually good, but a rushed game is forever bad." It's a pithy line, and more true than not, but it hides the complexity behind not only game creation but also the impacts of delays on people, cashflow and market position. Delays give you time to polish, edit and refine your game, but they also cost money, affect team morale, throw a wrench in marketing plans if mistimed and impact your release window.

All this became more relevant at Typhoon when we decided to add a few months to the development of *Savage Planet*. This is not really a delay — we hadn't announced a release date — but it affects our internal schedule in the same way. It was an easy choice to make because we don't think any of our 'unchangeable' decisions up to now mean we can't keep improving game quality. We have a list of things we'd like to add, and are excruciatingly aware that our first game will likely define the perception of the company.

But a delay costs money. Generally contracts are structured so that publishers are under no obligation to foot the bill, and even if they are, this extra cost will either be paid for by taking royalty points from the developer or, at best, be added to their costs ahead of any possible royalties. This means Typhoon will foot the bill, so we need to believe that the extra time would not just improve the game, but not sink us financially by putting us in debt with no hope of breaking even. The legendary studio Looking Glass, for example, did not close for creative reasons — it collapsed for business ones.

More challengingly, even though we have shown very little, we needed to imagine how to stretch our marketing budget to cover a longer campaign. Large studios tend to have an aggressive flow of assets, interviews, and other content to create a regular stream of communication between the game team and potential players, but with everyone at Typhoon actually making the game, and the game being much more focused than the



You need to make decisions
and then commit to them,
otherwise you work in circles
instead of making progress

usual triple-A buffet, we need to pick our moments carefully. Should we show gameplay at GDC first, or E3? How much competition for attention will there be at either event? Will someone announce a game with similar principles if we wait too long?

We also had to manage the team and their expectations. We have been driving toward GDC with the intention of showing real gameplay for the first time, so rewarding all that hard work by announcing that we weren't going to show it yet would have been hugely disappointing. In the end we decided to push ahead with GDC anyway, but you

could feel the air leave the room when we raised the possibility at a team meeting.

The goal of both the marketing beats and the presentation beats is not just to raise awareness, but also to give some external validation to the team so they can be excited about their work. Game-making can be a fragile endeavour, and despite popular opinion games are made by human beings with a strong emotional connection to their work. If they believe their work will mean something and find an audience, then they will push hard. If on the other hand they think that the game will be cancelled, the urge to hit the pub instead will take over.

Which brings us back to how time and deadlines affect development. It may sound like more time is always a good thing — and a good team is keenly aware when they don't have enough of it — but you also need a clear plan for what you want to do with it. During development, you need to make decisions and then commit to them, otherwise you work in circles instead of making progress. And sometimes you realise with a sudden sense of dread that some of the decisions you can no longer change will have a negative impact on what players or reviewers think of the game, and that no amount of delay will fix it.

When I joined the *Army Of Two* team for the making of the sequel, we changed the tone from brotastic to black comedy, while trying to keep making the best, most bombastic '80s movie about you and your best friend versus the world. But the first game had already embedded a brotastic tone in the franchise and the public's perception of it, meaning that many people would never look at the sequel with fresh eyes.

Thankfully for *Savage Planet* we are not falling into an existing franchise, or attaching an external brand, so we are free to succeed or fail on our own merits. And now, with a bit more time, we can hopefully turn our slightly delayed game into a great one.

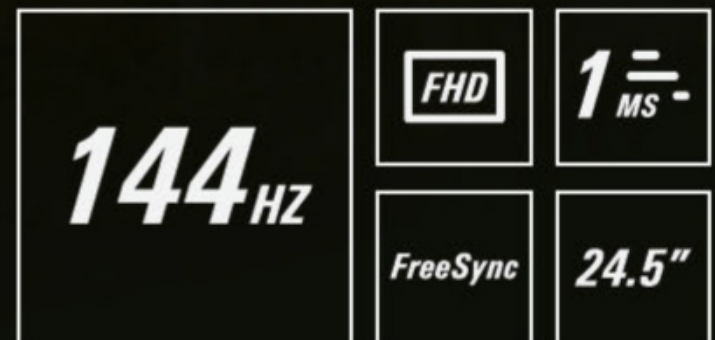
Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick




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THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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Two minutes past midnight

Discussing the post-apocalyptic setting for his new game *Rad* (p38), Lee Petty refers to calls in the US press for there to be more media about the fall of humankind. What was once about escapist entertainment, the thinking goes, is now a matter of preparedness. The Doomsday clock is at two minutes to midnight: we are the closest we've been to the apocalypse since the height of the Cold War, so it's time to rewatch *The Walking Dead* with notebook in hand. Well, whoever had that bright idea clearly hasn't played many games. The last thing we need is more of the blessed things.

Yet here we are, staring down the barrel of another round of games that seek to ask how we might survive when society finally goes up in smoke. Leading the charge is *Days Gone* (p34). Bend Studio's tale of one man and his motorbike has been long in the making, and while our time with it suggests the delay has been a question of technology – those eye-catching swarms of mutated Freakers from the game's announcement are nowhere to be seen – it may also be one of setting. Difficult as it must be to get hundreds of enemies moving at speed on a base-model PS4, it's even

harder to make yet another game about how actually the humans are the *real* bad guys in this scenario and have it meaningfully stand out.

Rad's answer to that problem is to fashion a mechanic from the apocalypse, with the irradiated wasteland causing mutations that can be experimented with in a variety of useful, and frequently disgusting, ways. As a Double Fine game, it at least has the one thing *Days Gone* conspicuously lacks: charm by the bucketful.

The post-apocalypse is so effective in videogames because it immediately casts the odds against you, and positions violent ingenuity as the logical way out. If nothing else, when the bombs drop, at least we'll all be better prepared than most when we find ourselves in an axe fight over the last tin of beans in town.

MOST WANTED

Dragons' Dogma: Dark Arisen Switch

With Hideaki Itsuno recapturing hearts and minds with *Devil May Cry 5* (see p106), now is a fine time to revisit his cruelly overlooked action-RPG, which has some fine ideas and features some of the best combat in the genre. A fine palate cleanser, too, for the Netflix tie-in anime.

Rage 2 PC, PS4, Xbox One

It's been a rather muted promo campaign for Bethesda's latest sequel, but while it might not have wowed on the preview circuit, we remain optimistic. Id's shotguns and Avalanche's explosions remain a combination that's hard to resist.

Super Mario Maker 2 Switch

A surprise announcement in a late February Nintendo Direct broadcast, this fills the summer Switch slot taken up in previous years by *Arms* and *Mario Tennis Aces*. We're already planning out some near-impossible creations (and a few easy ones) to while away the flight to E3.

DAYS GONE

Bend Studio's stumbling zombie survival game has some serious pacing issues

Developer/publisher	SIE (Bend Studio)
Format	PS4
Origin	US
Release	April 26

When was the last time Sony released a mediocre game? It's taken great pains to maintain its status as the golden goose of this console generation, and has so far succeeded with a clutch of handsome PS4 exclusives. And *Days Gone* started out looking – if not mind-blowingly original – promising, at least. An E3 2016 gameplay demo featured sophisticated crowd tech, a horde of thousands of zombie-like Freakers flowing over bridges and falling over themselves to attack the player. This was to be a survival game of sheer numbers, the oppressive momentum of the oncoming horde versus an ever-dwindling supply of machine-gun ammo creating a different kind of anxiety. But as we trek across *Days Gone*'s open world, it's not the Freakers – mostly alone, barely threatening, often too stupid to even notice our presence – causing the pit in our stomach. It's the growing feeling that Sony may finally have laid an egg.

It's difficult to be completely sure. Our demo starts with a more linear opening hour, before opening up the world for free-roam play. In neither of these sections do we catch even a whiff of the horde-infested set-pieces shown off in the early footage. But the technical challenge behind it is one of the main reasons why Bend Studio chose to develop *Days Gone* in the first place, creative

director and writer **John Garvin** tells us. "Honestly, it's not that different from what we did on PlayStation and PlayStation 2, or PSP, or Vita," he says. Indeed, conceptually, *Days Gone* certainly fits Bend's modus operandi: this is a studio that endeavours to innovate with what little it has, most recently having attempted to condense the triple-A experience down into handheld form (with mixed results) in *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* and *Fight For Fortune*. "Pushing Vita to its limits, for the size of our studio and for what the handheld could do, was a challenge. Bend Studio has always been up to the challenge of pushing whatever hardware Sony gives us. And so trying to do an open-world game and the technology behind the horde – getting 500 creatures on screen at once – these are things we defined very early on to really show off what PS4 can do."

There's no denying the open world's beauty: Bend Studio's recreation of its own back yard, the high desert of the Pacific northwest, is beautifully done and clearly a feat of technology in itself. The colour palette alone evokes a world in rapid and gruesome decay: rust-coloured forests are soaked in coppery light, everything so strongly suggesting the iron scent of blood that we can almost feel it sticking to our palate. Our ►



John Garvin, creative director and writer



ABOVE Controls change when on your bike, which catches us off-guard: shooting moves from R2 to R1, and your accuracy is dependent on the right ability upgrades. LEFT As in the *Far Cry* series, clearing out an area will unlock that location as a fast-travel point in the world. You'll have to burn down Freaker nests and kill the enemies that come running out of them



DAYS GONE



encounters with enemies, however, leave a far less exciting taste in the mouth. We mostly find them hanging around petrol stations or roadsides, loosely spaced apart and gibbering patiently while they wait for us to pass by. One mission that tasks us with chasing down someone who's a danger to our newfound survivor camp has us running through a copse of trees dotted with Freakers, but their AI is so dim-witted that we're able to avoid them without breaking a sweat. When we are forced into confrontations, they're not fast or smart enough to swarm, easily taken out with a rifle or a few swings of a baseball bat.

Without the numbers behind them, they're indistinct from almost any other zombie. Garvin is confident, however, that the Freakers have their own unique identity: "These are living creatures, and their ecosystem is something the player can learn about and use to his advantage." Freakers, he tells us, have their own stomping grounds; hordes will hibernate during the day in caves, but will exit

at night to feed and drink. They're sensitive to temperature and light. They'll hunt bears in the same way they would a player. "They're not the undead," he stresses. "They're not just shamblers wandering around that you've got to shoot in the brain and that's it." Well, you could have fooled us.

Perhaps we're just happening to miss all this depth out in the open world, but that in itself is concerning. There's mention of a proper horde nearby at one point, but the game specifically tells us to avoid confronting it until we're sufficiently geared up (though confusingly, it only looks to be a small group of ten or so Freakers picking over a corpse). But *Days Gone* should be letting its star – and, it increasingly seems, only – attraction out of the gate running. There is no early taste of what's to come in the late game. Instead, *Days Gone*'s opening is devoted to setting up the stakes, introducing us to our trusty motorbike and teaching the basic combat mechanics. The post-apocalyptic premise certainly feels like



ABOVE Hunting deer out in the wild will help you contribute to your camp, and functions like a simplified version of *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s system

Traps and environmental hazards can help you deal with hordes – but they can also be used to ambush you





LEFT *Days Gone*'s weather effects look stunning, from lashing rain to creeping fog. They, along with a changing time of day, will affect an enemy's ability to detect you through sound or sight: you can afford to be less stealthy than usual under cover of darkness, for instance



something dreamed up in 2013, back when zombies, grizzled blokes in backwards caps and the fridging of any female character in a two-mile radius weren't quite so passé. Yes, Deacon St John has lost his wife, and now that he's officially earned the title of "broken man" must set off across the open world in search of survival supplies and the truth.

The majority of our demo is spent riding

It should be letting its star – and perhaps only – attraction out of the gate running

our (bizarrely sluggish) motorbike from point A to point B, before using guns, breakable melee weapons and Molotov cocktails to rid an area of Freaker nests – burning one down causes a handful of its occupants, easily dealt with, to exit – and rescue survivors before pointing them towards the safety of Copeland's Camp. This hub area is where you'll spend skill points to upgrade St John's health, stamina and abilities (which include a focus shot and what is essentially *Assassin's Creed*'s Eagle Vision), and also your bike – something else that Garvin points to as an indicator of a different, more realistic approach to survival. The bike will take damage on rough landings, and you'll need to fix it and refuel it at regular intervals. "Fuel management is not something you see often in games, because it's very tricky to balance," Garvin says. "You don't

want to punish the player, having them constantly run out of gas and making it a chore. But on the other hand, you want that tension that comes from that constant fear of 'Oh my god, am I going to run out of gas?'"

Much of the reason why *Days Gone* has taken six years to develop is that Bend Studio is pushing itself further than ever before by making a systems-based game – it's taken time to balance a dynamic open world. "All the systems come into play in a way that makes predictability impossible, and that's what makes the gameplay experience awesome," Garvin says. "The permutations, how many different kinds of things that can happen, are just astronomical. And to make that work, you have to have all the systems there and in play. You can't really tune the game if you don't have the melee system quite done yet, because then you can't really tune the crafting system. All these systems have to be in play at the same time, and that means all of them have to be done and in the game and working. That's what takes the time."

It's a pity – and a worry – that this particular demo does such a poor job of displaying any of this work. If the Freaker horde sequences are a late-game feature, there's a very real danger of players losing interest before they ever get there. What we've played so far is an unremarkable collection of ideas that have already seen plenty of wear in the last five years, with no unique twists to help distinguish or develop them. This feels like an afterthought, buried at the end of what has been a successful generation for Sony. We can only hope that *Days Gone*'s similarly obscured horde will rear its head far earlier in the final game. ■

Settlements of human Marauders offer a steeper challenge than groups of Freakers, if only because they take a lot of bullets to fell. They do know how to take cover, but otherwise are just as braindead

Hush money

Stealth is, apparently, a key weapon in your arsenal against Freakers, even though we don't ever seem to find ourselves at risk of a swarm of them during our demo. Shots will attract larger numbers to an already-ensuing struggle, but silencers can be fitted to your guns to help minimise the chance of a situation escalating. Upgrading your bike (via camp mechanic Manny) can also help reduce the noise of the engine, while you'll need to dismount entirely and push it through places where you *really* don't want to attract attention. From what we've seen, however, driving into Freakers at speed is a fairly efficient way to ensure they stop hearing anything.



RAD

Double Fine's understanding of the apocalypse oozes wit and humour

Developer	Double Fine Productions
Publisher	Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format	PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	Summer

As we watch *Rad*'s many protagonists sprout gigantic cobra heads, throw around their own disembodied limbs and parp out a series of spider-legged mini-clones, we feel we're starting to see a pattern to **Lee Petty**'s work. "I do have perhaps an unhealthy association with body horror – it appeals to us all as we get older!" he laughs. The creator of the rocket-powered-head platformer *Headlander* is a Cronenberg fan, and the influence can also be felt in his latest game. "For me, it's maybe the intersection with identity. There's this strange artifice when you're playing videogames: you've got this character in front of you, and you're sort of projecting your consciousness onto it. And when the character's identity is changing, it makes you think about your relationship to that character. I find that fascinating. The part of body horror that's interesting is really the body awareness part, I think."

It makes sense, then, for *Rad*'s heroes to be an infinite gaggle of teenagers figuring out who they are in the context of the end of the world. Well, ends – two civilisations have collapsed on the trot, culminating in a bizarrely spliced environment as saturated with colour as it is radioactivity. The power source that makes your hometown liveable is failing: you must venture into The Fallow to find the means of keeping the town alive.

And if puberty wasn't enough body horror for these poor put-upon kids, they've now got the effects of nuclear waste to deal with. With its mutation mechanic, this top-down permadeath brawler has a whiff of *Rogue Legacy* about it: the star of each run will develop their own kooky physical and behavioural traits, which can both help and hinder their journey.

"We didn't want to make an RPG," Petty says, "and make a character that had a specific set of attributes that you slowly level up. What we wanted to do instead was really embrace the randomness and the lack of control one might feel in this post-apocalyptic, chaotic world." Your character choice boils down to what you find most aesthetically pleasing, then, as you pick a style that will remain consistent throughout all manner of body morphing.

The mutations themselves are a grisly pot luck of obvious external changes (exo-mutations) and more subtle internal biochemical tweaks (endo-mutations). Exo-mutations are associated with a button press – such as a pair of tree-like legs that unleash a thorny area-of-effect attack – while endo-mutations are typically more passive abilities or effects. Not all mutations are immediately useful, and some can be an outright hassle until you learn to master them properly. ►



Lee Petty, project lead





Sprouting wings allows your character to fly into the air and slam back down into the earth for a devastating ground-pound attack. We're not entirely sure of the combat benefits of a bare skull yet



RAD



“We’re challenging the player to be able to react to the mutation that they’re given, and learn over time how to capitalise on that,” Petty says. “The Armarang is a little slower than other ranged attacks,” he adds, referring to the huge purple limb that can replace a character’s non-bat-wielding arm, “but it can get someone on the way out and someone on the way back. Or if you line it up, you can hit multiple mutants at once.”

Exo-mutations can also have passive benefits and hidden active abilities, stack on top of each other for new combinations and even develop in nature as a run continues. One of the many possible variations your Armarang can branch into is a buzz saw. Throw it out and hold down the button, and it’ll spin in place. “You can use it to block an area, or train it on a more evolved alpha mutant to try and do more damage.” He laughs. “And it’s also just fun to watch!”

Rad bounces across riotous silliness only to frequently land in something deeper

Rad skips and bounces across riotous silliness only to frequently land in something deeper. Take the Homeslice mutation, for example. “It’s this symbiote that grows out of your back. It’s got a little pink hat, and talks nonsense — you know, Nintendo speak,” Petty explains, before doing a startlingly accurate impression of an *Animal Crossing* character. “It’s facing the camera, so we put a lot of effort into the facial expressions.” Homeslice will spit projectiles at enemies approaching from behind, but you can pinch it off and plant it in the terrain as a turret that can also be detonated, before it regrows once again from your irradiated back. “So that’s a good example where we could have just made like, an orbiting laser or whatever,” Petty says. “But we’re really trying to give these guys personality — they’re almost like little pets.”

Beyond the ’80s style and goofy humour, however, there’s something below *Rad*’s skin that appeals in a different, darker way. Head back to your persistent town to chat with the locals, collect sidequests and buy new gear,

and you’ll soon find that your new friend garners all manner of reactions, from amused, to pitying, to disgusted. “We’ve gone out of our way to write a stupid amount of dialogue for a Roguelike,” Petty says. “Most of ours isn’t explicit storytelling — it’s playing with the themes and reacting to the player’s choices, and brings more awareness to that kind of body-horror aspect. So you’re trying to heal the world, but in doing so, you’re becoming something less and less human, so there’s this concept of sacrifice present there.”

As is usually the case when we talk to today’s game devs about their visions of the post-apocalypse, we wonder how Petty’s came to be. He’s always been morbidly curious about the genre, having grown up during the height of the nuclear scare in America. “What was interesting was the random, weird creativity that came as a reaction to it,” he says, listing B-movies and tabletop RPGs. “Underneath that silly facade, there was this serious message. And I always liked that.”

Indeed, *Rad* feels like a more contemporary ode to this era’s particular brand of nuclear absurdity. “I mean, we’re definitely living in a country of mutants right now,” Petty laughs. A recent article in the Washington Post caught his eye: “They were actually complaining that we need more post-apocalyptic stuff in media. What they were sort of saying is that people should be panicking a lot more,” he says. “We’re in that ‘two minutes to midnight’ sort of state on the atomic clock again, but when Trump meets with North Korea and breaks these nuclear treaties, people aren’t reacting like they did when Ronald Reagan did that.”

He references the television broadcast of nuclear war movie *The Day After*. “The next day, Reagan was talking about it — which maybe doesn’t seem so absurd now, given the clown car that is our political situation. But at the time, it was really unusual for a president to say that. And there are rumours that he actually changed his stance on nuclear disarmament based on watching that movie — which, you know, is crazy to think about, right? That’s a certain level of prevalence that I think isn’t there right now.” If Petty’s latest truly hopes to be part of something bigger, radical is indeed the word. ■



Next generation

This kind of game is a departure from the norm for Double Fine, purveyor of linear puzzle-adventures. “The world itself is put together randomly, and the mutations are random, and that was new for us,” Petty says. “But it really helps you keep fresh eyes on the product.” Rethinking the way that he tells a story has been exciting, too. “In the past, we communicated them with more cutscenes and longer dialogue sequences, but now we’re communicating via the moment-to-moment experiences that are happening to the player. We have endings — we never bring them to a point where you can’t keep playing this game forever. But successful runs mean story drops, and over time they start to build into bigger world-changing arcs.”





TOP Vendors around town will sell you lesser endo-mutations and items, offer currency for things found out in the wild, and make sassy comments about your latest biological quirk.

RIGHT You access the world outside town through transference gates, which are leftover artefacts from the second lost civilisation

TOP The world is primarily an exterior, procedurally constructed environment, but there are dungeon-like interiors to explore and loot. ABOVE Your trusty baseball bat functions as your main weapon, but you'll need mutations to deal with multiple enemies efficiently. MAIN Petty cites the comics of Mœbius as one of the inspirations behind *Rad*'s hyperreal visual style





The atmosphere of distrust between humans and robots is only hinted at during the demo, when Mist seems eager to wrap up his investigation of the murder scene quickly before the police arrive

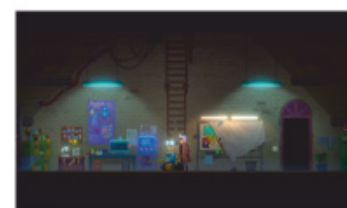
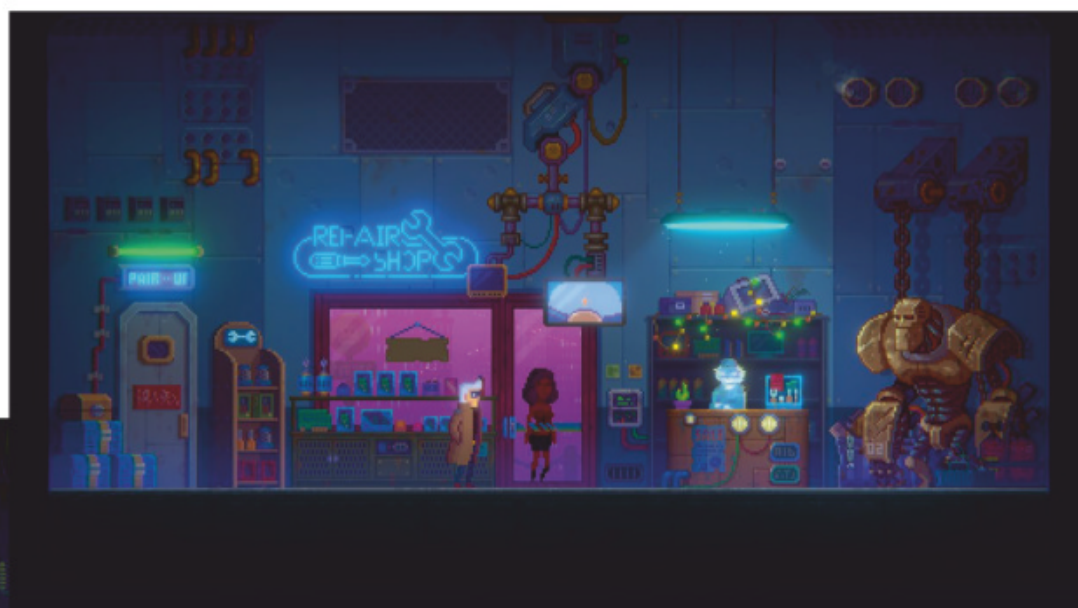


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TALES OF THE NEON SEA

This point-and-click investigation
has a twist in its tail

Developer	Palm Pioneer
Publisher	Zodiac Interactive
Format	PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin	China
Release	Summer



TOP A gloomy synth-led soundtrack heightens the noirish mood.
ABOVE The lack of highlights on non-critical items is a blessing in a sense, though if you like Mist's internal commentary on things, you'll be doing a lot of fruitless clicking

TOP Outside dialogue, the game keeps its interface as unobtrusive as possible, allowing you to take in your surroundings without unwanted distractions.
ABOVE *Tales Of The Neon Sea* has already won an Excellence In Visual Art award at China's WePlay festival, and it wouldn't be a surprise if it picked up more.
RIGHT It's hardly the first Kickstarter game to miss its due date – the game was originally set for release last October, but that's partly explained by how much it's grown. The campaign suggested a five-hour adventure; now it's seemingly twice as long





TALES OF THE NEON SEA

Palm Pioneer's sci-fi point-and-click adventure follows the recipe for a classic detective noir. Its protagonist is a hard-bitten, heavy-drinking private investigator. Its world is one of faded glamour and corruption, all rundown buildings and gaudy neon. There is, inevitably, a grisly murder that needs solving. But *Tales Of The Neon Sea* has a secret ingredient all of its own: cats. And not just any old cats, but playable cats. *Talking cats*. Cats whose social structure and hierarchy seems to have been as carefully thought through as the game's human world.

We first encounter William, a black cat with blazing orange eyes, in the cluttered apartment of Mr Mist, a retired detective who now pays his rent as a PI for hire. He also happens to be an android, and one on the verge of falling apart, as his assistant – a Johnny Five-like robot – is only too keen to tell him after an impromptu body scan. The two are soon pressed into investigating a strange noise coming from another room; alas, the lights are out and Mist must rearrange a circuit to fix them, via a fairly straightforward rotational puzzle. When the lights come back on, he's facing what appears to be a haunted suit of armour. Time, obviously, to retrieve a claymore from his bathroom and tackle the spectral intruder – which of course turns out to be William, trapped inside and desperately mewling and wriggling to get out.

If that particular puzzle would seem to have the loveable incongruousness of a vintage point-and-click, then the process of solving it is very different to the LucasArts greats. Any objects Mist can pick up or interface with are highlighted with an icon as he passes by them – and he's free to make pithy observations about his environment elsewhere with the tap of a button.

In other words, it's a pleasant change from dragging a reticle across the screen, pixel-hunting for critical items. And then suddenly we find ourselves doing something very much like that when Mist stumbles across the corpse of a woman who's been savagely beaten to death. With no sign of the police, he takes it upon himself to investigate. At which point we're asked to painstakingly scrutinise the body, moving a magnifying glass over

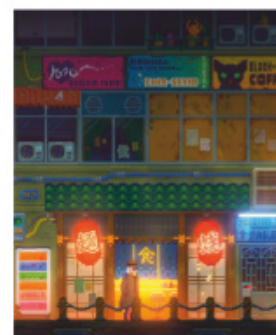
wounds and torn clothes, with two scan settings highlighting superficial observations and deeper insights – such as the precise nature of the woman's injuries and the condition of the corpse.

Individual clues can be combined into inferences, which in turn need to be connected to earn a replay of how the victim died (the why, at least so far, remains tantalisingly unanswered). This comes in the form of what can only be described as a playable metaphor: a minigame where you physically place cogs representing Mist's thought processes inside a pocket watch. Once the wheels are turning, you get to see the cause of death. Lucas Pope, eat your heart out? Not exactly. There's no real deduction called for on the player's part; it's merely a matter of finding all the pieces and, well, slotting them into place.

Individual clues can be combined into inferences, which need to be connected

Then finally it's back to the real star of the game, as William seeks a cat of high standing for permission to move through his current environment. Passing through vents and hopping onto balconies, he's tasked with removing a simple obstruction – a tangle of sparking wires – and then rearranging a triptych of neon signs, while engaging in extensive feline dialogue with a variety of furry locals.

For all the cats you encounter, *Tales Of The Neon Sea* could be accurately described as a mongrel of a game, and whether it succeeds will likely depend on how well it manages to knit together those disparate elements. That's hard to divine from a build designed to show off its multi-faceted approach to storytelling – in the finished game, the tonal shifts might not seem quite so stark – but if nothing else, Palm Pioneer has crafted an adventure with more than its fair share of surprises. If it can keep us on our toes for its supposed eight- to 12-hour duration, then consider us ready to set sail. ■



Word imperfect

A warning that the build we play "does not represent the final quality of the game" makes us a little less concerned about one or two minor technical issues, such as our crime scene investigation being soundtracked by a constant mewling from the feline witnesses nearby. The script, however, potentially represents a bigger issue. The many typos – a consequence, no doubt, of a developer not working in its first language – will be fixed. But while the occasionally eccentric turn of phrase is strangely fitting for the feline exchanges, Mist's lines are both clumsy and perfunctory. Still, the visual storytelling compensates somewhat; there are dozens of sharp little details in the pixel-art environments that breathe life and character into *Tales Of The Neon Sea's* debauched world.



Multiple boss fights will span various genres of music, including rock, EDM and jazz. This concept art for a space-themed stage appears at the end of our demo, and the music suggests a disco challenge

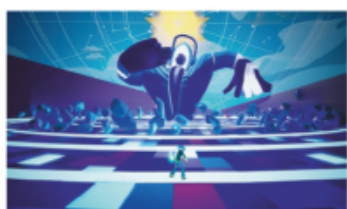


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NO STRAIGHT ROADS

Metronomik's experimental rhythm-action
game riffs on music and metaphor

Developer/publisher	Metronomik
Format	PC, PS4
Origin	Malaysia
Release	2019



TOP The glowing musical notes floating behind Zuke here are a kind of ammo you build up and then shoot at enemies from range.
 ABOVE We're no strangers to a deadly dancefloor: hopefully this stage features a twist on the theme



TOP Mayday and Zuke live in the glamorous locale of the city sewer. It's here that you can upgrade their gear.
 ABOVE Each district of the free-roam Vinyl City hub will be visually themed around its reigning boss character.
 LEFT The boss fight we play tells the story of an abusive parent-child relationship through symbolism. As the puppeteering mother becomes more controlling over her daughter's performance, changes in the environment reflect her growing influence and ego



NO STRAIGHT ROADS



Wan Hazmer (top) and
Daim Dziauddin,
co-founders of
Metronomik

Sometimes you've just got to march to the beat of your own drum. Such is the case for Metronomik co-founders (and cousins) **Wan Hazmer** and **Daim Dziauddin**. Hazmer was one of the lead game designers on *Final Fantasy XV*; Dziauddin worked as a character concept artist for *Street Fighter V*. They'd always talked about setting up a studio together and, inspired by his weekly trips to Japanese arcades, Hazmer was keen to experiment with the kinds of parts that music could play in games. "It just seems that music has only two roles in games," he says. "Either it's a soundtrack or it's a rhythm game. I'd like to explore those limitations: for players to play music games without being limited by the motor skills required."

The result is Malaysian indie studio Metronomik – and its first game, *No Straight Roads*, in which you play as a two-piece band who use their musical talents to take down an evil EDM empire. Hazmer describes it as more of "a rhythm-centric action game" than a rhythm game: while the first section feels familiar, as we jog down a linear corridor and musical notes fly towards us, it opens out into a stage upon which a diminutive pianist – backed up by her overbearing and slightly demonic mother – plays.

There's no punishment for not hitting a certain note. Instead, things play out in a manner similar to bullet-hell action games such as *Nier: Automata* or *Furi*. We dodge some musical note obstacles, hit others, and parry the occasional fast-moving purple one before seizing upon an opportunity to dash in and deal some damage. The difference between guitarist Mayday and drummer Zuke is largely negligible, for now: although each character's moveset will evolve in its own unique way in the final game, they currently both wield a similar three-hit melee combo.

But the ability to transform stage props into useful tools reveals some divergence: Mayday's is offensive, conjuring up turrets, while Zuke's is more defensive, summoning fans that suck up obstacles and convert them into ammo for ranged attacks. Switching between the two characters means we can constantly tweak and upkeep the balance of our utilities, and while this demo boss isn't particularly challenging, we can see how this

light tactical layer could offer multiple approaches to more complex battles.

Good rhythm games are often about the satisfaction of pulling off feats of dexterity: if *No Straight Roads*' more accessible approach to the genre is to be successful, it'll have to inspire the same feeling through different mechanics. And, as the stage morphs into new forms around us, we continue to feel the effects of these alternate dopamine delivery devices. Once we figure out how certain boss attacks sync up to the beat, we're able to kite falling bombs away from us, and hop over damaging ground-pounds with perfect timing.

It comes as no surprise, then, to hear that *Dark Souls III* was a key influence – not in terms of difficulty, but in the rhythms that

Hazmer describes it as more of "a rhythm-centric action game" than a rhythm game

players must identify and lock into. So, too, was its approach to storytelling. "There are minimal cutscenes, but there are certain boss fights where it creates an atmosphere where you're like, 'Wow, what is the story behind this?'" Dziauddin says, pointing to the Abyss Watchers as one of his favourite examples. "That seamless flow between gameplay and story, that's what excites me."

Indeed, that was his personal reason for wanting to co-found his own studio, and begin work on *No Straight Roads*. "I feel like we have barely tapped storytelling in games. It's nobody's fault, but I think most of us are hardwired into thinking that story in games should be cinematic, like a movie." For him, this is an opportunity to join the boundary-pushing indie scene he so admires. "We want to make a story that can only be experienced through a game. And this touches on a lot of themes: it's about being an artist, it's about what is fame to you, and all that stuff. So every character, every boss – not just the heroes – all of them have their own reason to play music." Metronomik's own reasons for doing so are compelling: this is a game, and studio, making all the right noises. ■



No half measures

Having each spent several years working at big studios, Hazmer and Dziauddin are well-armed with industry savvy. "I told Tabata-san [director of *Final Fantasy XV*] five years ago that after I was done with *XV*, I wanted to bring all this know-how to Malaysia," Hazmer says. With a team of just 20, the two have to lead responsibly. The original plan was for *No Straight Roads* to feature a four-person band, but it would have put strain on the team. "Our logo is a metronome, because not only do we care about the role of music in games, but also the pace of work in our company – so no overtime, for one. But the other thing is we want to come up with a game every year or so." After what it must have felt like to work on *FFXV*, we're hardly surprised.





AUDICA

Harmonix's finely tuned VR shooter sets its sights on rhythm heaven

Perhaps we'd be inclined to play the piano more often if it involved shooting the bejesus out of the keys. But Steinways everywhere can breathe a sigh of relief: *Audica*, the new virtual reality rhythm shooter from *Rock Band* maker Harmonix, more than satisfies our murderous musical urges. Much like in its melee-focused contemporary *Beat Saber*, we're given a pair of weapons with which to hit the targets flying towards our face in time with the beat. Only this time our tools aren't laser swords, but twin pistols.

Blasting through a level in *Audica* is Baby Driver by way of Ready Player One. Splinter's electro house, and explicitly videogamey chirps of 'Round one!' and 'You win!' suggest the latter, as we float in the VR void, our guns obliterating short notes with crisp shots or pushing targets away with crackling energy beams for bassy builds. But the overall feeling – of syncing our every movement to the beat, seemingly single-handedly moving the rhythm forward with well-placed bullets and perfectly-timed melee strikes – is pure Edgar Wright editing, playing out in realtime.

Scoring serious points requires a more studied approach. With sci-fi blasters in hand, we don't just have to think about timing – there's also accuracy to consider. Aiming down sights with correct 'form' increases our chances of hitting a target note dead-centre, which dramatically boosts our score. Shooting might be a more familiar action than sword-swinging to many players, but still requires careful design. "We're trying to strike the right balance of challenge and accessibility for players across the entire spectrum," Harmonix co-founder **Alex Rigopulos** tells us. His team's early experiments with loosening the timing window were illuminating: "It made the game easier to play – but at the same time, it's not teaching players how to play well, because the essence of the game is learning to feel the beat, internalise the music and lock into the rhythm of the soundtrack."

Making allowances for shot accuracy, meanwhile, made *Audica* more forgiving "in

a way that did not fundamentally tamper with the integrity of the experience," Rigopulos says. "As they became better at aiming, people could just use their increase in skill at aiming to move up the skill curve." Indeed, as we practise our sharpshooting on the same song over and over, we can feel both our timing and accuracy tighten up. And we can see it – after every run, a graph of how well our shots have landed (our left hand appears to have a bit of a drift) floats in front of us, daring us to go again before we've even looked at the score. "We got pretty nerdy with it," Rigopulos laughs. "We really wanted to expose to the player what's going on under the hood with sufficient granularity that they would have a clear path to levelling themselves up as players. Are they tending to play late? Are they tending to miss

"The essence of the game is learning to feel the beat [and] internalise the music"

in one direction higher, lower, left or right?"

The skill ceiling is in a different league from what we've seen in most other rhythm games; we'll doubtless start to see incredible feats of athleticism now that *Audica* has entered early access, and Harmonix's team is gearing up to live-tweak one of its games for the first time. Rhythm-game enthusiasts can look forward to analysing and fine-tuning entirely new layers of their performance – but also, alongside casual fans of music-fuelled action, pondering why on earth it feels so good to enter into choreographic combat with a song. "We have this long and beautiful history of creating games that you interact with primarily through your fingers and hands alone," Rigopulos says, "and one of the great promises of VR is that it lets you interact with these worlds using your whole body. And I think that music in particular invites forms of interaction that are just profoundly joyful, because of this hardwired joy of moving one's body in sync with the rhythm." ■



Blast from the past

Audica's origins lie in *Chroma*, Harmonix's cancelled team-based, firstperson rhythm shooter. "We found that in order for a team-based FPS to be successful, it had this long list of requirements that often found themselves at odds with the core rhythm shooting mechanics that were so compelling," Rigopulos says. As VR took off, Harmonix returned to a more focused version of the idea – hence, *Audica*. But the team isn't ready to give up on the idea of PvP entirely. "We have many ideas about various multiplayer manifestations of *Audica*, and we very much hope to return to those at some point in the future. We just wanted to focus on nailing the core interaction first. Once we've established that as a foundation in the first release of the product, then we have lots of dreams about where we might take that in a multiplayer context."



TOP Round notes may look simple, but can be tough to hit swiftly and accurately. Diamond notes with long, sweeping tails provide relief. ABOVE Yes, you can cross the beams produced from extended notes. Yes, it does make cool lightsaber noises. LEFT We can't say we're enamoured with any of the current songs, but modders will soon take care of that. BOTTOM A good level is about "alternating phases of intensity and rest," in both a physical and mental sense, Rigopoulos says. Modders, take note: we're not as young as we once were

Developer
Coffee Stain Studios
Publisher
Coffee Stain Publishing
Format PC
Origin Sweden
Release TBA



SATISFACTORY

A factory-building sim that makes conveyor belts look cool

Here, the sky really is the limit. This open-world factory builder's modus operandi might be reminiscent of *Factorio*, but the addition of the third dimension in *Satisfactory* changes everything. When building your empire, you can choose to construct upwards into the great wide yonder – even to the point of breaking the game, we're told. Sounds like a challenge.

The encouragement of this mischievous ambition in its playerbase seems about right for Coffee Stain Studios, the maker of *Goat Simulator*. This is easily the biggest challenge the studio has yet set itself, comprising not only complex three-dimensional building, crafting and movement systems but also online multiplayer in a persistent world. It's a characteristically precocious goal, and all the evidence suggests that it's about to pull it off – with the help of a gaggle of early access players – in some style.

With its firstperson perspective and defiantly lush vistas, even on a purely visual level *Satisfactory* feels like a sorely needed refresh of a dusty old genre. The alien planet you're in charge of pillaging in your quest to complete the mysterious Project Assembly looks like it was quietly asked to leave *No Man's Sky* for making the other planets feel insecure. From verdant forests to glittering deserts, each of its many biomes is distinct. You're given a choice of location upon starting your factory: while building among forest is a great option for beginner players, offering biomass to fuel early-game structures with, braver or more experienced players might opt for the wide-open real estate of the desert. The latter is less immediately bountiful, but allows you to get on with building instead of demanding you first level out wonky terrain.

While the gathering and crafting of materials within these luminous locales will,



no doubt, be about as gently entertaining as games of this type tend to be, the building is on an entirely different level. Well, several of them. The freedom to stack structures on top of each other combined with the player's perspective means that Coffee Stain has had to employ some clever design tricks.

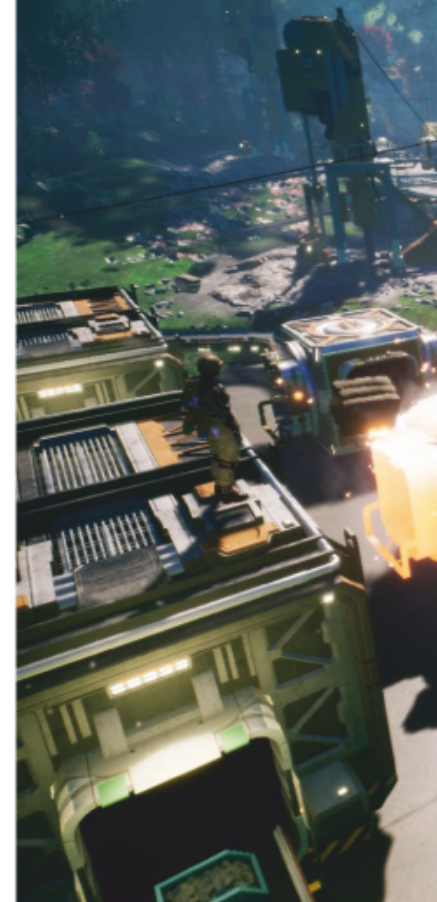
In firstperson, placing down ore smelters and freehanding twisty conveyor belts quickly becomes an issue when you're trying to think

Adds a crucial twist of colour, personality and even intimacy that has long eluded the genre

in terms of the bigger picture. Constructing climbable watchtowers in strategic positions is one way to get a more traditional top-down view of your factory. But when there are various floors to mentally juggle, the jetpack becomes an essential means of dipping and diving through your labyrinth of industry to make extemporaneous tweaks.

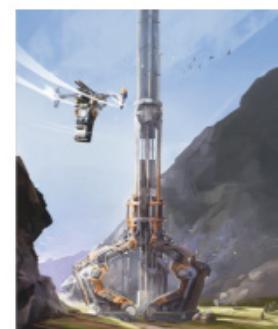
In fact, there's far more to movement in *Satisfactory* than you'd ever expect from a

ABOVE Hostile animals will spit deadly substances and charge you down (but, unlike *Minecraft's* Creepers, can't destroy your buildings). Your default shock baton offers some protection, but later on you'll be able to craft a variety of guns to deal with more dangerous fauna





LEFT Getting to a higher vantage point for a better view is often as simple as boosting onto a roof using your jetpack. BELOW This scanner helps you play 'hot and cold' with items you might need; a larger radial scan flags up nearby veins of ore for your mining pleasure



Plains, trains and automobiles

Vehicles were in the game from an early stage, we're told, not because of the huge amount of ground players would have to cover but simply because the team thought they'd be entertaining. Your main transport is the explorer, a quick and light four-wheeler designed for short field trips (and sick drifts). Tractors and trucks are a better choice when you need to haul resources across large distances, but trains outstrip them all in terms of capacity and speed. And when you've found new outposts and set up remote mining stations, a well-put-together railway is essential to the expansion and automation of your planet-stripping industrial empire.



Beacons can help you keep track of locations as you explore, providing waypoints that you can return to at your leisure. You can custom-label them as a reminder of what's waiting there

factory sim. These interconnected structures can soon grow to a dizzying scale on a planet that's 30 square kilometres, and so Coffee Stain has provided an array of methods by which players can catapult themselves across their creations. Jump pads have already been toned down significantly since their initial inclusion, but will still send you hurtling many metres; conveyor belts, meanwhile, don't just function as a means of getting resources from A to B, but can also be used as speed-boosting sprint tracks.

We will undoubtedly see *Satisfactory's* early-access players beginning to branch out

into homebrew activities within the game – parkour races are certainly within the realms of possibility, and Coffee Stain's own makers admit that one of the first things they did was use factory parts to design *Trackmania*-style courses on which to race vehicles.

Quite apart from the myriad latent creative possibilities here, *Satisfactory* looks highly likely to provide the same bizarre super-mechanised gratification that *Factorio* did for serious sim builders, while adding a crucial twist of colour, personality and even intimacy that has long eluded the genre – and could tempt in a whole new breed of builder keen to call Coffee Stain on its cheeky dare. ■



ROUND-UP

SHAKEDOWN HAWAII

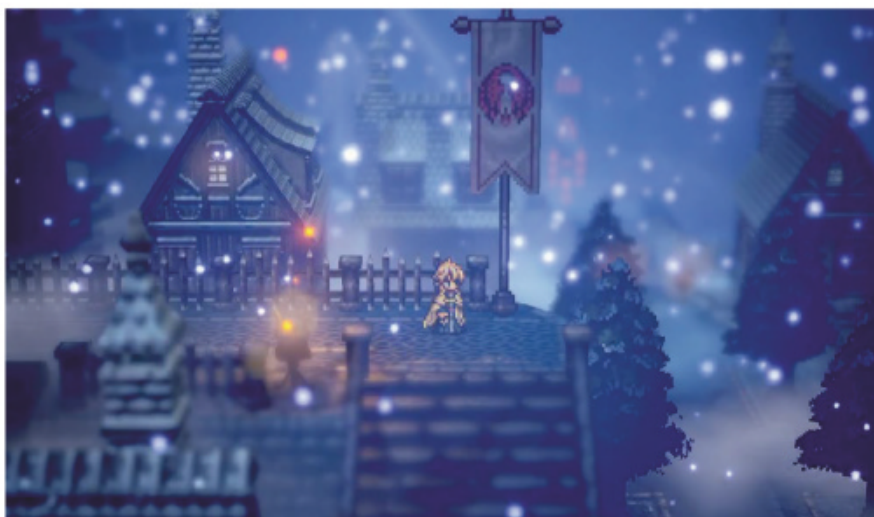
Developer/publisher VBlank Entertainment Format 3DS, PC, PS4, Switch, Vita Origin Canada Release 2019



Brian Provinciano's follow-up to long-in-development 8bit pastiche *Retro City Rampage* has been equally long in the making. It's the 16bit era in Provinciano's sights this time, but despite the art style this is a thoroughly modern game. It tells of a CEO whose business has lost out to technology, so sets about dismantling it. That means taking out delivery trucks to demean online shopping with the help of your layabout son (control of whom you'll assume through some *GTAV*-style map-warping). The action is fast-paced and responsive; the empire-building soon involves acquisitions and rezoning. It already looks well worth the wait.

OCTOPATH TRAVELER: CHAMPIONS OF THE CONTINENT

Developer/publisher Square Enix Format Android, iOS Origin Japan Release 2019



Square Enix recently patented the self-styled "HD-2D" artstyle that powers last year's cheery, if brutally difficult, *Octopath Traveler*, an odd move at the time that makes a little more sense now it's headed to the ethical wild west of the smartphone app stores. This prequel to the Switch game is also set in Osterra, and while it will only offer three story branches this time, will live up to the implicit promise of its name in combat by expanding your party size to eight.

WRATH: AEON OF RUIN

Developer Killpixel Games Publisher 3D Realms Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One Origin US Release 2019



There's an affectionate pet name for the subset of people who think the FPS peaked in the '90s, and *Wrath* has got the *Quake* Boomer cognoscenti in quite a lather. Developer Killpixel is comprised of veterans of the *Quake* mod scene, and its first bespoke game takes the theme in an even gorier direction.

CONAN UNCONQUERED

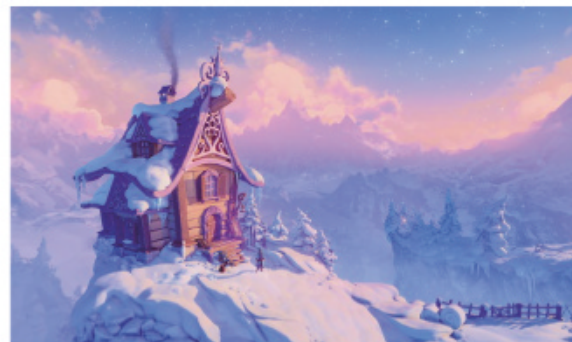
Developer Petroglyph Games Publisher Funcom Format PC Origin US Release Spring



The Westwood vets at Petroglyph may be toiling away on the *Command & Conquer* remasters for EA, but *Unconquered* takes its lead from *They Are Billions* and *Frostpunk*, tasking you with managing disease, disasters and progressively more powerful invasions at the same time as building an empire.

TRINE 4

Developer Frozenbyte Games Publisher Modus Games Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Origin Finland Release Summer



Frozenbyte is returning to first principles after *Trine 3*'s full 3D graphics, with the fourth in its smart puzzle-platforming series returning to the glorious 2D on which it made its name. This is no mere throwback: for the first time in the series the party-driven puzzle-solving will support online or local co-op.

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Game Sky
Developer/publisher
Thatgamecompany
Format iOS
Release TBA

blue



How Thatgamecompany is expanding the
horizons of multiplayer gaming

By CHRIS SCHILLING



lowly, we amble up to the edge of the platform and stop. To our right a large ghostly hand appears, gracefully swiping upward like some higher power inviting us to jump. After a moment's pause, we do, plunging like a stone until an updraught catches us, and suddenly we're flying, our cape now a pair of wings as we soar through pillowy clouds. Our thumb instinctively guiding us, we dive and climb effortlessly, the score swelling as we soar up and on. That first takeoff is the one moment that perhaps sums up *Sky* better than any other: it's at once everything you'd hope for and expect from a Thatgamecompany game on mobile, and a bold step beyond.

But if *Sky* ultimately challenges your expectations, at first it seems more than happy to meet them. Turn your eyes to the horizon and you'll see mountains and tall columns of heavenly light. This is a world of whispering winds, swaying grass and glittering sands, all sumptuously lit and backed with an orchestral score that swells at all the right moments. You'll set ancient mechanisms rumbling to life and encounter friendly spirits. Your avatar's energy is once again contained in an item of clothing, only this time it's a cape rather than a trailing scarf.

And if your favourite individual moment of *Journey* was that sunset sand-surfing set-piece – and let's face it, that's probably most of us – well,



Chen: "I never tell people how I want them to feel, because it just sounds cheap. But within our team, we have core values, guidelines. For *Sky*, we have three words. The first is wonder; the second is community. And the third is humanity"

IF SKY ULTIMATELY CHALLENGES YOUR EXPECTATIONS, AT FIRST IT SEEMS MORE THAN HAPPY TO MEET THEM



there's plenty of that sort of thing in *Sky*, including an exhilarating downhill race across soft, snowy slopes, with a twisting ribbon of ice running through the middle if you want to go even faster. It feels fantastic, too: even given the natural adjustment from thumbstick to touch controls, your avatar moves with unusual grace, whether airborne or on the ground. And landing is every bit as fun as taking off: get your angle of approach right and you'll skid across the ground for a while before stopping. We're playing the game on an iPhone XS, and with haptic feedback the sensation is irresistible.

Yet for many, *Journey's* appeal ran deeper than superficial sensation, its power born not from a connection with its world but a bond forged with other players they encountered on their adventure. In fact, a number of its players, having finished the game and fully upgraded their scarves (and thus their traversal capabilities) returned as white-cloaked shepherds, guiding newcomers through the game. *Sky*, in many ways, is an extension of that – it supports up to eight players, and subtly incentivises playing in groups.

As Thatgamecompany co-founder and creative director **Jenova Chen** explains, the studio received dozens of emails from players after completing *Journey*, asking if there was some way to play with friends and family. "I mean, technically ►

OUT OF THE BLUE



Within the Aviary – a handy multiplayer meeting point – you'll find your wardrobes to the right, which allow you to change your avatar's look. In the distance are portals that take you directly to the realms you've unlocked

you can set up two PlayStations to do it, but nobody has two PlayStations at home," he says. "But what we learned is a lot of the people who played the game found it had this therapeutic effect on them. That is something honestly I had not planned – the fact that a lot of people would find value in playing this game and that it made their life better. I wanted to create a game that could truly bring something positive to people's lives, but to a much bigger audience."

A move to mobile was inevitable, then – not least since Chen was once again keen to make his game accessible to a broader audience. His studio, after all, has always sought to simplify controls as far as possible. *Flow* is controlled with a single analogue stick and one button; *Flower* uses tilt controls and a single button. And *Journey* was a concerted effort to use the DualShock's motion sensors to escape the complexity of twin-stick controls. He explains: "The thing I care about the most is for people who don't usually consider themselves gamers to have a good time. And I noticed that when there's too many buttons, they're kind of intimidated. People understand how to operate a stick but they've never practised

how to operate both at the same time. I saw this lady playing [*Journey*] and she could jump and she could move separately but she just couldn't jump and move at the same time. And so it was a real struggle for people who had no experience of platforming games."

It was 2013 when work on *Sky* began in earnest, at which point Chen had noted that most mobile players hated the idea of virtual sticks on touchscreen devices. And so he and his team spent a long time trying to find a touch-native setup that offered a similar degree of control to a standard gamepad. "We felt like if we didn't do that, then people would just say, 'Oh, I would rather just play this on a console'," he says. As a result, Thatgamecompany spent the best part of two years prototyping all kinds of control schemes. Having tried countless alternatives, the studio finally settled upon one that Chen was happy with. Another year later, in 2016, development was about to wrap up. "And that's when the market changed."

At the time, *Sky* still supported multiplayer, but it was structured very much like *Journey*: a simple, reasonably short story with linear progression in which players would travel through stages in chronological order, reaching the end and then – hopefully, as many did with *Journey* – starting again. But then Chen had a conversation with Apple, and *Sky* began to evolve into something ►



Thatgamecompany's audio director Vincent Diamante

UPBEATS



So what did *Sky*'s shift in direction change for audio director and composer Vincent Diamante? "Everything!" he laughs. "We started off with this idea for a game which was very linear, kind of monolithic, and in that first year I actually had a pretty strong idea of what the soundtrack would be. And then bam! The soundtrack was ready – but you're not hearing any of that stuff from 2013-2014 in the game when it comes out. It's just not there." The new themes are no longer connected to specific events in the story, he says, but linked to the emotion each area has been designed to evoke – which will change depending on whether players are exploring alone or with a group. "The music is a lot more modular than it was before," Diamante says,

"and there's a whole lot of stuff when it comes to interactivity and players contributing to the music that wasn't in there at the very beginning." The performative elements have, he says, been inspired by collaborative online music jamming tools, like ReaNINJAM, allowing players to sound good without any prior musical experience. And there's a *Zelda* influence. "I love the things Nintendo did with *Wind Waker*, where attack sounds escalate up the scale, or just things like enemies bouncing to the beat of the music," he says. "We try to do something similar with that – obviously, not in the context of a fight like a *Zelda* boss battle or whatever, but people coming together and making different yet complementary sounds."



"THE THING I CARE ABOUT MOST IS FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T USUALLY CONSIDER THEMSELVES GAMERS TO HAVE A GOOD TIME"

These are some of the visiting Spirits you'll meet in Sky's seasonal events. The studio says these will roll out every two to three months after the game launches

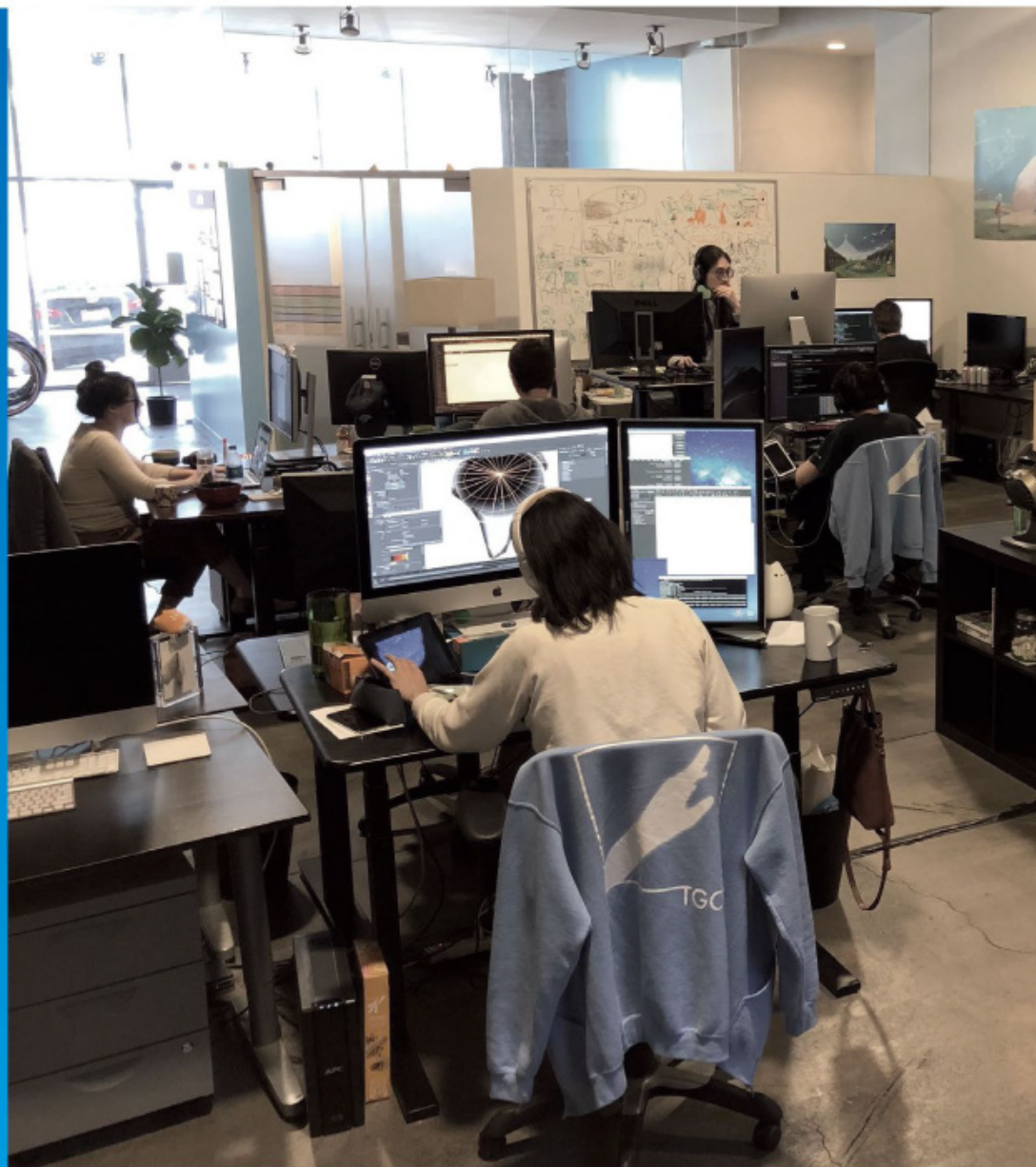


OUT OF THE BLUE

very different. "They were concerned about our business model, because they'd seen a big decline in people's willingness to pay for a game that comes with a huge price." Huge is relative, of course – by console standards, *Journey* was cheap, but on the App Store, it was another matter. "Even *Monument Valley*, which was like a House Of Cards [for Apple] – the sales numbers were pretty low compared to what we did on the PlayStation with *Journey* and *Flower*."

Just when the game was ready for its final spit and polish, Chen was told he should consider making *Sky* a free-to-start game.

Paying upfront was out of the question, then, and Chen quickly dismissed the option of charging players partway through the story. A third solution was briefly mooted: a virtual gift shop. "Like when you come to see a show or an exhibition for free, and then on your way out, there's merchandise at the end. But what kind of merchandise can you sell? If it's a mobile game, it's not like you can sell a T-shirt. I mean, it's possible, but I've never really thought about becoming a company that focuses on selling T-shirts!"



He laughs, but the issue of monetisation has clearly been a thorn in his side. Chen admits he spent some time looking at other successful F2P games and found their approach too aggressive. "My main perspective is how people feel. And a lot of people, when they pay for these free-to-play games, I guess they feel somewhat shameful? Because it's self-weakness – you know, 'If I just pay a buck, I can beat this level'. Or, 'I want to get a loot box with a legendary drop – just two more bucks'. And you might have buyer's remorse, and you don't really want to tell your friends that you put a lot of money into something for selfish reasons. I'm trying to make a game that touches people's hearts. As a director, I never thought about spending money as part of the experience. Now, I'm trying to make something that does not interfere with the core message of the game."

How exactly *Sky* will be monetised is still, pardon the pun, up in the air, though Chen is adamant that there will be no nickel-and-diming. There's talk of an Adventure Pass that doubles rewards for players who complete seasonal events. And Chen hints at an altruistically motivated model whereby players will feel rewarded for helping others. "We realised that people are more likely to tell their friends and feel good about spending money in a situation of charity. Like, 'Hey, I bought my wife this amazing diamond ring'. People are proud to say that, because it's not like you bought it for yourself,



IT WAS CLEAR SKY HAD TO GROW. THATGAMECOMPANY HAD SET OUT TO MAKE A RIDE. NOW IT HAD TO BUILD A THEME PARK



As with *Journey*, the low-hanging camera emphasises the imposing size of *Sky*'s structures. Meanwhile, the ray-like creatures you see here are friendly: approach them in mid-flight and they'll carry you on their wings

right?" Regardless, before any decisions had been made, it was clear *Sky* had to grow. As Chen puts it, Thatgamecompany had set out to make a ride. Now it had to build a theme park.

His analogy makes perfect sense during a multiplayer session with a handful of Thatgamecompany employees, alongside one or two beta players who seem keen to join the group. Chen has used a temporary shrinking spell on his avatar to make it smaller, and as we clasp his hand he skips forward, dragging us along with him. It looks for all the world like a kid excitedly tugging their parents around Disneyland – and, indeed, that's the feeling Chen says he's aiming for, even if he reckons he's "not quite up there with Pixar and Disney just yet". From a large hub area, the Aviary, you'll gradually gain access to six themed lands, each designed to provoke a different sensation in the player, from wonder to magic, freedom to fear. Just as *Journey* had its darker moments, the Wasteland biome features a stealth-focused section with a giant shadowy beast (Chen refers to it as The Krill) that patrols a large area, rushing at you should you wander into the roving spotlight shining from its eye. It's here we see the benefits of sticking together and collaborating: one player can distract the beast while the others slip away unnoticed. If the creature does manage to land an attack, you'll lose some of your collected spirits, which need to be retrieved quickly. ►





Some of the most charming interactions between players are the simplest, though there are more unusual tricks to discover. Bring along a chair instead of a musical instrument, for example, and you can conjure a table for a group of four players to sit around

That's just one of a number of reasons *Sky* is best played with at least one other player – including the ability to have all eight players hold hands, forming a chain to glide down mountains or float off to new horizons. Multiplayer is a 'soft' requirement, Chen explains: certain puzzles and challenges are more difficult if you're on your own, though he says experienced players should be able to get through them without assistance. This becomes apparent as we trek through a rainy forest, ducking under cover to keep our character's light intact. Along the way, we can light clusters of candles and huddle by them to recover. But to complicate matters, your main objective involves carrying an object which not only slows you down, but its own power can run out unless you reach the next glowing collectable in time. Travel with a couple of companions, however, and you'll naturally replenish one another's light supply.

There are some other puzzles that demand a helping hand, though the areas they unlock are

MULTIPLAYER IS A 'SOFT' REQUIREMENT: CERTAIN PUZZLES AND CHALLENGES ARE MORE DIFFICULT IF YOU'RE ALONE

relatively small, and they're inessential for the main thrust of *Sky's* story, which revolves around awakening a number of slumbering spirits. The larger ones supply the most useful upgrades, but the others play a role that becomes increasingly important to *Sky's* social side. Revisit them and supply them with enough light and they'll give you various cosmetic items (from new masks to cape colours) and emotes – which in turn can be upgraded further. Eventually, you'll unlock musical instruments, with which you can launch into impromptu jam sessions or, if you've collected a music sheet, perform preset songs via a touch-based rhythm-action minigame.

Even if you're alone, there are plenty of reasons to come back. Chen recognises that people often play mobile games in short sessions, and that has, in part, dictated the studio's approach. We never expected to play a Thatgamecompany game where farming items is not only possible but encouraged, but you'll always find candles that need lighting scattered ►



Q&A

JENOVA CHEN, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THATGAMECOMPANY



Jenova Chen founded Thatgamecompany with fellow USC graduate Kellee Santiago 13 years ago

Do you see *Sky* as a spiritual successor to *Journey*?

I wanted to combine all the games that we've made, and the lessons we've learned, going back to *Cloud*, which I made in school on a PC – [like *Sky*] that game is about flying in the clouds. So I wanted to make a new game that had all the good parts of the others. Originally, *Sky* was actually supposed to be *Cloud*'s sequel. But then as we made it, we realised there were so many things from *Flower*, *Flow* and *Journey* that we wanted to influence it. And so as a result, it's more like a spiritual sequel of *Flower*, *Journey* and *Cloud*.

Did you learn a lot from *Journey* in terms of encouraging players to collaborate with one another?

Oh, yeah. But it's really about how you set up. I mean, if you go to the community of any competitive game, when players actually get to talk to each other on forums or in the game the conversation is inevitably going to be competitive and demanding, basically, and that shows one side of human dynamics. If you want people to connect with each other at an emotional level, a power fantasy doesn't help. Like, if this guy is Superman and this guy is Batman, then it's logical that the first thing they think about is who is the more powerful. People only think about collaboration, communication, and making connections when they don't feel they are on top of the world. If you ever go hiking, when you run into someone on the trail,

it's usually very friendly, and you help each other out if necessary. But if you're in the middle of Times Square or London, where people are busy and their mind is filled with their agenda of executing power or gaining more power – everybody's levelling up, right? – when you try to talk to somebody or connect with someone, they don't have time to pay attention to you.

You have a particularly strong desire to bring games to new players, don't you?

For quite a while, most of the friends I grew up with stopped playing games. They told me, 'Games are for kids'. Or 'I'm just too busy. I don't have time to play 40-hour-long games'. So they left games behind. And personally I felt really sad that the thing I loved was no longer meaningful to the people I cared about. So my goal is always about making games relevant in that way. Certainly my parents would never consider games as something for them. I'm doing everything I can in my career so that when I retire and tell people I'm a game creator, they would see me as if I told them I was a poet or a screenwriter or a novelist. There's an innate sense of respect when you tell them that you're an artist, you create something that talks about and deals with humanity. Right now, if I tell people I'm a game creator, they usually either think, 'Oh yeah, my kids play games, they probably play too much' or they'll say, 'Oh I heard about this game that made a lot of

money, did you guys get rich?' For me, there's only one way to change the situation.

Which is?

Well, people still say, 'Are you a gamer?' They don't say, 'Are you a music listener?' or 'Are you a TV watcher?' It's more, 'What kind of mood are you in? Let's go watch a movie,' right? Like, whatever type of emotion you need to experience, there's a movie or a piece of music for that particular need. The fact people are asking you 'Are you a gamer?' assumes that there are certain emotions that gamers would prefer as entertainment, and that most of the other emotions that society needs, games don't provide. So my goal is to push the boundary of the emotional range and depth that games provide. And for me, the most effective way is to allow a gamer to play with their family. A lot of times, a gamer will enjoy a 'gamer game' a lot, but it's too much for the people around them that don't play games. Like my favourite game is *Dark Souls*, or maybe *Shadow Of The Colossus* – these are very difficult games! I could not imagine my wife being able to play these games and say she enjoys it. And so, I was hoping to create a game that gamers love, but that they also feel comfortable to invite their partner, their kids, maybe even their parents to play together.

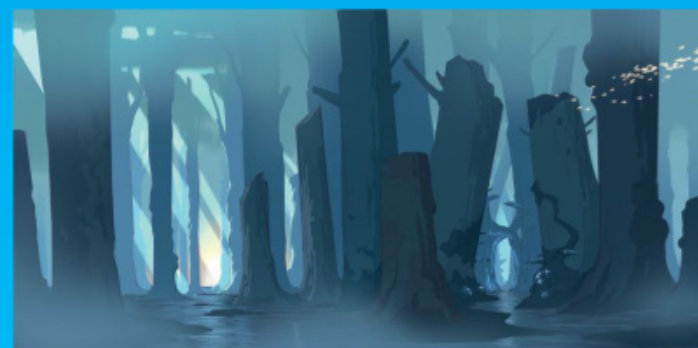
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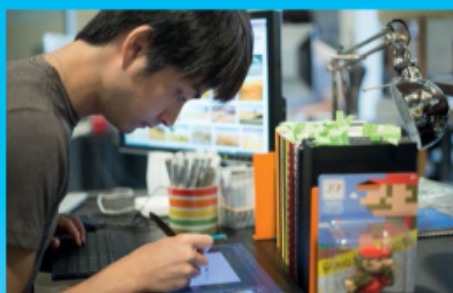
Art manager Yui Tanabe says he wants to emphasise expression rather than "coolness" in *Sky*'s character designs

about the world. Doing this, and burning away certain obstructions, will earn you wax to top up your own supply of candles, which are the game's main currency, exchanged with the aforementioned spirits for rewards. That's one way of spending them, at least. But as soon as you begin *Sky*, you're encouraged to play altruistically. Your friend list is a friend *shrine*, a twilit hub where you splash around in shallow waters, bestowing 'wing blessings' on your friends to give them a boost for their next play session. If you're feeling flush, you can send a gift of three candles which equates to a heart, a second currency reserved for special items. And if a friend is already playing the game, you can tap their spectral avatar to teleport directly to wherever they are in the world.

Getting *Sky* to the place where kindness is encouraged without forcing it upon players has been one of the biggest challenges, Chen says. *Journey* managed it organically, but a free-to-start mobile game is a very different proposition. He recalls an experiment around two or three years ago as an example of how it shouldn't be done. "There was this really attractive tool that the player could unlock – if you came with a friend, you could basically pull up 'Excalibur' and unlock it right away," he says. "We made it so that levelling up the relationship between you and a stranger would cost gold or resources, so you'd spend money or time to befriend someone. And what happened was, players would just befriend whoever happened to be there. Then they'd both get the tool and just walk away from each other, because they're not real friends. Afterwards, they all said they resented the relationship – like, they don't even know who this person is, but now they're in their friend list." ►



AIR STYLE



For art manager Yui Tanabe, adapting the house aesthetic for smartphones hasn't always been easy, but through ingenious engineering and smart design, he says, the results compare well with Thatgamecompany's previous work. "The limitations of the hardware are actually in alignment with our style, which some people would call minimalistic. I mean, we do always say less is more. Trying to simplify and shave off whatever isn't necessary in the visuals kind of works with mobile devices," he says. We are, admittedly, playing on one of the more powerful handsets, but *Sky* is exceptionally pretty, with gorgeous lighting and some delightful effects, none of which seems to affect how well it runs – at least until six players simultaneously set off a bunch of fireworks. No doubt it helps that *Sky*'s biomes are self-contained. Those lights on the horizon can't be reached without loads, but the transitions between areas are remarkably swift once you're in the game.



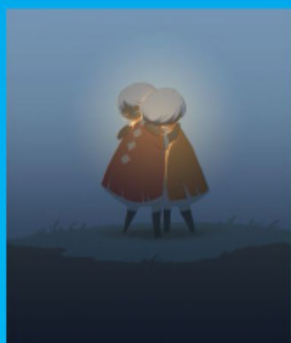
Chen has clearly taken a few cues from his favourite game, *Dark Souls*, both in the way fire is considered a safe haven, and also by letting players plant individual candles bearing short messages within the world

YOU'RE ENCOURAGED TO PLAY ALTRUISTICALLY. YOUR FRIEND LIST IS A FRIEND SHRINE, A TWILIT HUB





“ULTIMATELY, WE WANT TO BE A NUDGE RATHER THAN A LEASH WHEN IT COMES TO HOW WE MAKE PLAYERS FEEL IN THE GAME”



There's a wide range of positive gestures whether you're more of a hugger or a high-fiver. Hold your finger on the onscreen button rather than tapping it and you'll extend it, producing a more emphatic animation

Even today, he admits, the game's altruistic focus isn't perfect. "Some of the design is still kind of on-the-nose, and that's something I was trying to hide. Because ultimately, we want to be a nudge rather than a leash when it comes to how we make players feel in the game." Yet if the game's beta testers are anything to go by, it seems to be working. In one area, for example, boisterous crabs attack you; even so, some players have been trying to find ways to tame them rather than scare them off. It helps that you're not actually forced to make friends to progress. Indeed, you'll find benches at which you can chat to strangers for three minutes; should you want to continue the conversation beyond that, you can extend the hand of friendship, or else set down a candle to extend the time limit. Already, *Sky*'s beta players have begun to develop an accepted etiquette: co-operative successes are celebrated with a high-five, while a wave – or in Chen's case, a farewell hug – is a natural way to let other players know you're logging off.

Thatgamecompany is hopeful that for most players it'll be au revoir rather than a more permanent goodbye, even when the story's over. Limited-time events will bring new spirits with exotic collectables, while there are plenty of secrets, hidden areas and world events bound to certain days or times, such as rainbows and firework displays – though one unlockable lets players create local pyrotechnic displays of their own. For Chen's part, he's confident *Sky* will attract an audience of advocates who'll relish bringing loved ones with them, just like he takes people to his favourite theme park. "I've been to Disneyland so many times that I've become an expert," he says. "And so I love to take my friends and family to see them enjoy the wonder just like the first time I went there. And because I can give them tips, they get to see much more. That's the experience that I want gamers to have – we want to first make sure that *they* have a good time and hopefully they'll bring someone who doesn't necessarily play games and have a wonderful experience with them." ■



In the Wasteland region, bear left to reach the boneyard or right for a beach full of crabs. "Neither of them are friendly!" laughs Chen, though some of Sky's most exclusive collectables can be found there





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As the military lines up a new generation of game-players in its sights, how well do our skills really translate to the battlefield?

BY EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL

Cassidy Little is a big fan of *Tom Clancy's The Division*. A TV presenter and actor you might recognise from *Strictly Come Dancing*, he's especially fond of the game's harrowing mingling of PvP and PvE – the Dark Zone, an area of plague-ridden New York in which the distinction between friend and foe collapses and death costs you hard-won gear and character progression. *The Division* is, Little says, the only game to muster “a fraction of the adrenaline” he felt during his time as a Royal Marines medic in Afghanistan, which ended in 2011 when he was caught in an IED explosion, suffering extensive injury across his body and losing his right leg below the knee.

Betrayals are frequent in the Dark Zone, as players team up at random to tackle other squads or tougher NPCs, only to shoot each other to pieces for the lion's share of the rewards. Little likens this to the threat of friendly fire from allied Afghan units infiltrated by the Taliban – according to *The Long War Journal*, a total of 35 US-European coalition soldiers were killed and 34 wounded by such attacks in 2011. “I know of a lot of people who died because they were sleeping and one of the Afghan guys opened fire on the tent from inside their own compound. It's called ‘green on blue’, and it's a horrible thing. And in the Dark Zone you can't trust anybody, even the guy who's on your team.” In Little's eyes, the risk of progress loss when you're gunned down in the Dark Zone also fosters a sense of consequence most shooters like *Call Of Duty* never provide, however dizzying their recreations of conflict. All that said, the game remains a fantasy about war with some elementary limitations. “You can never replicate the feel of being at war in a videogame if you can respawn,” Little says. “Because trust me, if I could respawn after I lost my fucking leg, after I lost my friends, I would have. It's a shitty hand to be dealt.”

To say that games about war fail to capture the experience of war may sound like stating the obvious,

but given the continuing intimacy between the game industry, military organisations and gaming culture itself, the obvious can't be restated enough. *The Division's* handing of assault rifles and grenade launchers to a sleeper force of civilian troopers reflects decades of military investment in videogames for the sake of training, testing, publicity and recruitment. This is especially the case in the United States, birthplace of the FPS, which in 2015 spent more on its armed forces than the next seven countries combined. The US Army is technically one of the oldest videogame publishers: its activities stretch from 1996's Marine Doom mod through 2002's *America's Army* to present-day military esports teams and Operation Overmatch, a free-to-play sim in which players test out prototype tanks and armoured cars.

Videogame developers, for their part, have fallen over themselves to embrace military trappings and themes, recreating real-world firearms and vehicles and enlisting service members as consultants and promoters. In some cases, developers have even built tools for the military, such as the Virtual Battlespace simulator series created by Bohemia Interactive Simulations, which was founded by the developers of *Arma*. One legacy

of this symbiotic relationship is an underwriting of the hobby by military jargon, from the commonplace use of military ranks in multiplayer progression to borrowed slang terms such as “frags”, “fog of war” and “waypoint”.

This common ground is integral to the UK Army's “Belonging” recruitment ads from January this year. Besides appealing to “snowflakes” and “selfie addicts”, these court “binge gamers” with the suggestion that videogames nurture skills that can be readily transferred to soldiering. One YouTube video declares that the stamina required for a gaming marathon is just the right fit for a career in the forces: it intersperses footage of a boy's face bathed in the glare of a ►

The US Army
is technically
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videogame publishers:
its activities stretch
from 1996's Marine
Doom mod

fantasy RPG with shots of professional troops performing nighttime manoeuvres.

The ad campaign is provocative not just for implying that a healthy K/D ratio might prepare you for combat, but for resurrecting the cliché of ‘gamers’ as an ostracised group – a “misrepresented generation” of “timewasters”, in the words of an accompanying editorial in the UK Army-backed Locker Magazine. As **Joseph DeLappe**, professor of games research at Abertay University, notes, this is a poor reflection of the popularity of games today across many age brackets and backgrounds. “To target gamers for recruiting purposes is almost like targeting everybody. Especially teenagers, it’s kind of part of the world for them.” The new ads are thus something of an exercise in circular logic: they define players of videogames as misunderstood and closeted in order to rescue those players for military service.

In the eyes of German airforce mechanic Thomas, whose name has been changed for the purposes of this article, pitching to players is more about reaching young people than tapping into any skillset videogames supposedly teach. In the UK Army’s case, there is a pressing need for an injection of new blood, whether partial to *Diablo III* or not: the force is seven per cent below its required strength, at the time of writing, after missing recruitment targets for six years straight. The US Army, similarly, has struggled to lure recruits as the nation’s economy has recovered from the 2008 recession, missing its targets last year for the first time since the outbreak of the Iraq War. “They’re targeting a younger audience now simply because the current generation serving is mainly baby-boomers,” Thomas observes. “And they’re starting to get old or sick. From a human resources point of view I think it’s ingenious, because games are what younger people relate to. From a moral standpoint I think it’s kind of questionable,

because it doesn’t convey the actual field of work. It’s kind of dishonest, really.”

So is there any truth at all to the claim that playing games gives you skills applicable to military service? The answer is “some”, but it’s important, given the time and money spent flogging the idea of the game as a training device, to highlight the limitations of these portrayals. To begin with, videogames do instil management and teamwork skills that can be useful to soldiers. “What I experienced in NCO training was that people who didn’t play videogames typically had a much harder time finding their place in a group, analysing their own group’s particular skills, and establishing a leadership position than people who are

playing games more regularly,” Thomas says. “They had a much easier time identifying skills that could be useful, and listening to their teammates or their subordinates.” Shooters and action games may also be helpful background for roles, such as signalling, that require the ability to read and interpret stimuli quickly. On the other hand, “just because you play shooters and are good at aiming, doesn’t mean you know how to shoot a gun.” Indeed, as abundant as firearms are in videogames, virtual shootouts are woeful preparation

for the reality. “You don’t get the impulses, you don’t get the smell, you don’t get the sound; you don’t get the feeling of the vibrations in the air.”

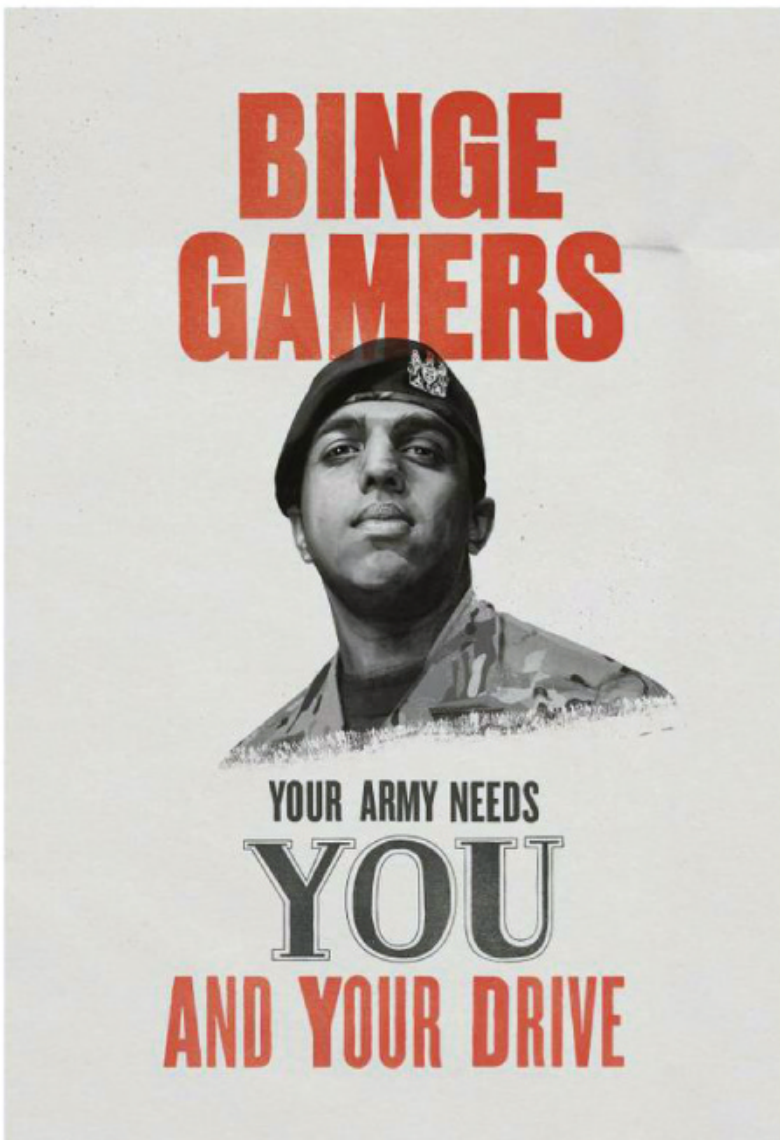
The Division’s Dark Zone aside, Cassidy Little has a few words of praise for *Call Of Duty: Ghosts*, which features a camouflage system and tutors players in the usage of “dead ground” – areas within range of a weapon system that are untargetable thanks to terrain factors. “The principles of why you are seen can be applied to a videogame and therefore vice versa, I would hope,” he says. “So, you could technically put together an eight-man fireteam, and breach a building in a PvP context, and hope they don’t shoot the civilians. You could use that as a learning tool, sure. But that ►

“People who didn’t play videogames typically had a much harder time finding their place in a group”

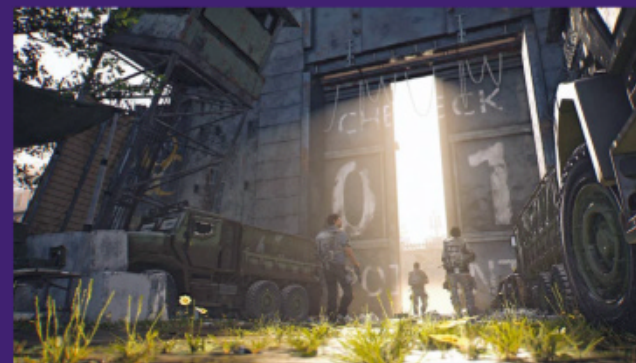


ABOVE Cassidy Little – actor, Forces TV presenter, and Royal Marine medic.

LEFT Based on commercial tech, Bohemia Interactive Simulations' Virtual Battlespace has been used for training and mission rehearsal by militaries in over 50 countries, including the US



FIND WHERE YOU BELONG
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CENTRE *The Division 2*'s three Dark Zones represent something of a retreat from the first game's treacherous atmosphere.

ABOVE In the US Army's Operation Overmatch, data from multiplayer vehicle battles is used to assess prototype tech.

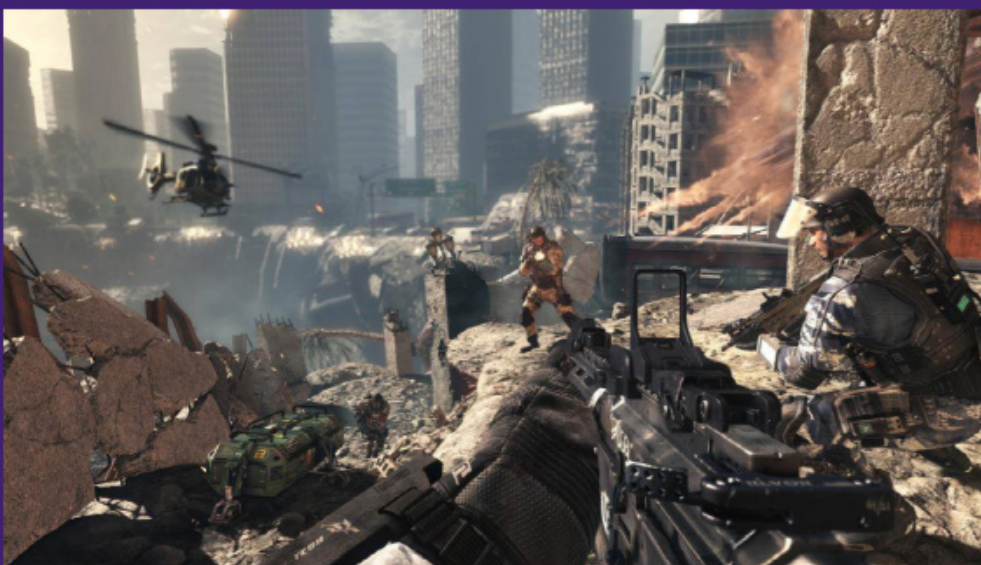
LEFT 'Gamer' bait aside, the UK Army's new ads also challenge stereotypes and feature a more diverse cast of soldiers

HOME FRONT

Games about going to war rarely touch on the experience of being in uniform at home. "As a soldier you're not exactly shunned, but there's still this disdain," German air mechanic Thomas reflects. "You really notice when you're out in uniform, [the reaction is] 'Oh my god, there are still soldiers?'" He suggests that this reflects the lingering shame over Germany's role in the World Wars. It's a dramatic contrast to the USA. "If you queue in an American airport, every second announcement is 'Servicemen and their families are allowed to come through to the special lounge,'" Paul Sulyok observes. "And if you're wearing uniform, even if you're a Brit, kids will come up and say 'Thank you for your service', and shake your hand."



TOP In a rather chilling show of efficiency, Pandemic's US Army-sponsored infantry training sim *Full Spectrum Warrior* has been used in modified form to treat PTSD in Iraq war veterans. ABOVE Paul Sulyok – CEO, GreenManGaming, and British Army captain



ABOVE Advances in graphics technology and new VR headsets notwithstanding, there's still a place for physical props in modern tactical simulators. (MoD/Crown copyright, 2014). LEFT Many soldiers play videogames while in the field – for recreation, not training. Last year, Activision showcased *Call Of Duty: WWII's* DLC at US bases in Kuwait and Germany

doesn't help with physical muscle memory of having to carry a rifle, deal with stoppages, identify hazard zones, use the battle buddy system. There's not enough interface in a videogame to be able to teach that."

These are conclusions echoed by **Paul Sulyok**, CEO of PC retailer Green Man Gaming, who served as a captain in the British Army's light infantry during the 1990s. Sulyok identifies three key aspects of being a soldier – administrative, personal and an awareness of how your unit's actions support your commander's strategy, in which you may only be a decoy. "Soldiering can be a very technical occupation," he says. "How do you get something from A to B? The administration and the challenges around that are significant – 'I've got the following resources, I need to put them over there, this is how to do it'. The second element of soldiering is the personal one. People are fatigued, people are frightened, people are people. You can have the ability to allocate your resources from a technical perspective, [much as you] could be the best resource-managing gamer in the world, and still not be able to lead a bloke down the street. Let alone into combat." Videogames can, and have, engaged successfully with the academic or technical aspects of being a soldier, in Sulyok's view, but they are ill-equipped to portray the myriad stresses of being part of a group of infantry in the field. "When it comes to down to resource allocation, the academic side of soldiering, you can very much emulate that. But unless you're running up and down a hill, and you're soaked to the bone, and you haven't eaten for 24 hours, and you haven't slept for 48 hours, then you can't really use games to recreate a combat environment."

If they are dubious about simulations of combat, our interviewees identify one area where games, or simulations, might help soldiers navigate scenes of conflict – communicating the rules of engagement.

These refer to the circumstances and conditions in which you are permitted to use force, and the manner and degree of that force: they are the criteria, in other words, that theoretically separate a "just war" from indiscriminate mass-murder. The nature of those rules differs from country to country. In Germany, a country that has served as aggressor in two world wars, the rules are relatively tight, though how scrupulously they are observed is another question. "There's a row of checks we're supposed to go through for ourselves," Thomas says. "Is it right that my superior is ordering me to shoot that person? Technically you're supposed to go through all that, but I think many people shut that out, because they've been desensitised in some way. There's

a German word for "blindly following", *kadavergehorsam*, and that's the type of person that, let's call them 'human resources', don't want in the German armed forces any more."

These are questions the creators of military games might explore, both for the sake of a powerful story and to provide a public service. There are precedents in military simulation tech. Little recalls using a lightgun-style simulator to explore rules of engagement, for example. "You have an SA80 A2 [assault rifle], which is the

weapon system we used in theatre, and they have a screen in front of you, and they have a set-piece. I think the one I was on was a vehicle pulling up, turning the corner, coming to a stop. And your job with this thing, there were two of you, was to pull the trigger if and when you think it's appropriate." Trainers then took their charges through the footage, rewinding each shot and asking whether it broke the rules. "If somebody's going to shoot at you, you're within your rights to shoot them. More importantly, if you think somebody's going to shoot you, you are fully within your rights to take them out, and say, 'I genuinely thought he was going to shoot me'. That being said, if somebody doesn't have a weapon and comes running at you, ►

"[You] could be the best resource-managing gamer in the world and still not be able to lead a bloke down the street"

you can't just shoot them in the face, because it's like, how much damage could he have done, and is there a way you could have defused the situation better?"

It's easy to imagine a great videogame narrative that explores the rules of engagement, communicating something of how a soldier might resolve an encounter with minimal bloodshed. Indeed, such stories are being told, just not by military games. Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series and BioWare's older RPGs, for example, often engage with the question of whether violence can be justified, and follow through on the consequences when it isn't. Military shooters, however, typically erase all ambiguity in order to speedily engage with the technicalities of combat itself, and seldom ask you to contend with the fallout: as Thomas notes, despawning bodies to free up memory also frees you from thinking about your victims. *The Division 2*, for example, opens with the player encountering two people in masks standing over somebody they've just shot, kicking the body. Even before you wander into aggro range and are fired upon, your opponents are thus unambiguously marked as deserving of termination. The Dark Zone is once again the aspect of the game which tugs against this creed, by suggesting that a band of heavily armed strangers might (however infrequently) have friendly intentions.

The lack of ambiguity around friend and foe in military games is shadowed by the increasing prevalence of unmanned vehicles or devices in combat, from mounted guns to Predator drones, which often use game-style controllers and interfaces. According to many former drone operators, the interface and procedures of drone warfare makes it hard to perceive targets as human beings, and harder to apply the rules soldiers are supposed to apply in the field. Speaking to *The Guardian* in 2015, former US drone pilot Michael Haas compared launching a strike to "stepping on ants".

Military shooters typically erase all ambiguity in order to speedily engage with the technicalities of combat

This is partly because drone programmes often operate on the fringes of legality, and are not subject to the same juridical rigour as other modes of warfare. In July 2018, a UK all-party parliamentary probe derided government arguments in support of two drone strikes as "weak and inconsistent", and labelled the US drone programme a potential violation of international law. Drone strikes continue to be popular with politicians, however, because as in videogames, drone warfare can be waged without direct cost to the pilot, though the psychological toll is often severe.

"Our warfare is more and more drone warfare, and drone warfare is zero casualty for us," Little tells us. "We're talking about people sitting in boxes in Nevada, controlling vehicles that are capable of doing huge amounts of damage, and [the key skills are] your hand-eye coordination and understanding of drone technology, as well as the software drones use – not necessarily programming the software, but the ability to interface with that, to look at a screen and treat that as your world, as every gamer does. You think about the hand-eye coordination that's required to be the best *Call Of Duty* player – if you can apply that to a drone, you've got one hell of a soldier, one hell of a bomb-dropping machine."

Joseph DeLappe comments that this is, in essence, the completion of the circle of inspiration between military organisations and the game industry. If it's hyperbole to declare that war has become a game, there is a sense of mutually reinforcing callousness between military games and the rise of remote-controlled weaponry. "What's fascinating and horrifying to me is that things like *America's Army* had similar roots to the training games they were developing for the US military, and now [those games] have kind of crossed over into actual use, in military technologies from drones to other remotely guided technologies, robotics. I think we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg." ■

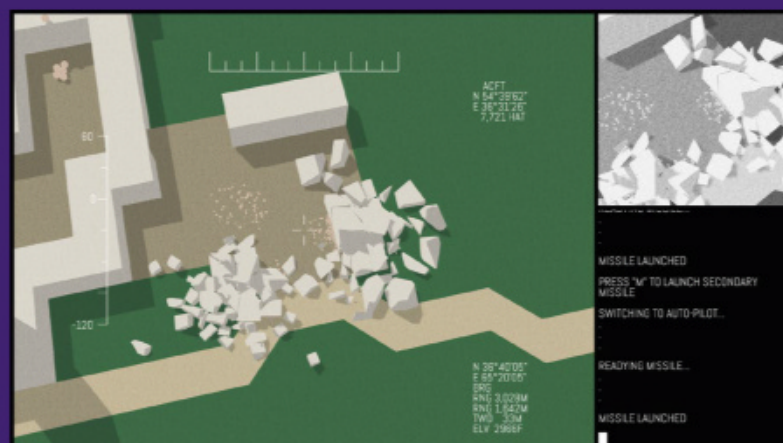
RIGHT Dating back to 2002, *America's Army* is perhaps the most successful 'militainment' videogame series ever made. It has been exhibited at hundreds of events around the US. BELOW *Modern Warfare's* Death From Above mission is a raucous celebration of airpower, a highlight reel in which the game's opposing forces are reduced to smeary silhouettes



ABOVE Joseph DeLappe, artist and professor of games research. BELOW Available on Steam, *Killbox* takes its name from the practice of designating a 3D target area for aerial and indirect fire, developed by the US airforce in the 1980s

SABOTAGE TACTICS

Artist and academic Joseph DeLappe has spent years attempting to subvert the ideologies of military videogames from within. In 2006's *Dead-In-Iraq*, he typed the name and date of death of every US service member killed in Iraq into the *America's Army* chatbox, turning a glossy recruitment tool into an eerie public memorial. 2016's *Killbox*, created in partnership with Scottish developer Biome Collective, simulates a drone attack from the point of view of operator and victim. Its reduction of humans to orbs and deathless white-on-green environment speaks to the difficulty of empathising with a target when viewed through a drone interface. "I like to think that the work will eventually reach good numbers of people," DeLappe says. "Particularly young people who maybe aren't thinking about the actual costs of joining the military."





L I V I N G

This year, one of the most influential MMORPGs ever turns 20. The people behind EverQuest explain how, and why, the crusade continues

By JEN SIMPKINS



L E G E N D

There was a time, not so long ago, before the Internet. In 1999, the world wide web was about to take off properly. A couple of Stanford students had just founded a plucky little company called Google, Wikipedia didn't exist and Facebook was but a malevolent twinkle in Mark Zuckerberg's eye. But a new kind of videogame had already begun to appear: the MMORPG, which used this nascent technology to allow players from all over the world to play together in a persistent online universe.

EverQuest was one such genre pioneer. Released in 1999, it became the first-ever commercially successful MMORPG built in a 3D game engine, and was an almost immediate hit. Inspired by text-based multi-user dungeon games, *EverQuest* not only drew players' curiosity but managed to keep it burning for the next 20 years. In an age where the closure of MMOs is an all-too-common occurrence, *EverQuest* is still very much alive – and growing. After talking to the people responsible for carrying on the legacy of one of the most influential videogames ever, we're beginning to see why.

Not that **Andy Sites** – or indeed, anyone at 989 Studios and Verant Interactive – ever dared to imagine

this kind of longevity. Indeed, Sites' first look at *EverQuest* left him underwhelmed. "Honestly, when I first saw it, I was like, 'This looks kind of rough around the edges'. I wasn't super-impressed by it." *Ultima Online* had just launched to great fanfare and, despite being a bit of a mess technically, had an undeniable edge. "Visually it was way more polished, because it was a more completed product than *EverQuest* at the time. So I thought, 'This looks kind of cool – but my god, it has a long way to go'."

About a year before launch, Sites came onto the project as a designer and associate producer, getting stuck into design work and quest writing "as well as managing the mundane crap like ordering dinners and exporting all the world environments." Lacking the technology or any kind of model for creating a game of this scope and ambition, everyone on the team tended to pitch in everywhere, creating their own solutions to grand problems on the fly. The improvisation would carry on through *EverQuest's* multiple beta phases. Sites and his QA lead would personally duplicate, package, hand-label and post the CDs out to participants. "During the beta phase, the inkling I had that we might have ►

something special was when I started getting all of these industry people wanting to be my friend,” Sites laughs, recalling requests for beta access from people at Blizzard and Atari Games. “It wasn’t until we got to, I think it was the fourth or fifth – and final – phase of beta, where the numbers were so high that we were sending out tens of thousands of discs, that we ended up using a fulfilment house that we typically use for duplicating gold masters for PlayStation games.”

Still, the mood among the team of 20-or-so people in the run-up to launch was far from relaxed. Expectations were established by *Ultima Online*, which had sold tens of thousands of units. Every two weeks, head of games John Smedley would gather everyone around a whiteboard in the conference room. “We’d start writing numbers on the board,” Sites says, “going, ‘If we hit 70,000 units sold lifetime, we’ll all have our jobs. 110,000 we’ll be sitting really nicely. If we hit 130,000 plus, that’s just unheard of, that’ll be unbelievable.’” These conversations were largely because of the studio being part of the PlayStation group at the time. “We were literally the black sheep, because not only were we not a console game, we were PC-only, 3D-only, online-only and subscription required. So it was like, four strikes against us.”

In March of 1999, *EverQuest* launched in North America. Almost immediately, it was chaos. Queues of people spilled out of shopfronts; when they got home with their copy of the game, things got even more hectic. *EverQuest*’s login system was crudely put together, and based on one of the studio’s previous games: after installing the game, players would have to connect to a login server, which was a simple text chatroom with a list of selectable servers and worlds. “There was an admin command that we could use that would allow you to refresh the number of new players,” Sites says. The entire team would sit and refresh: 8,000 players. Another five minutes would go by, and another refresh: 11,000. “A minute later, we have another couple hundred and we’re going, ‘Holy shit...’

“Everyone in the team had that command. And we kept refreshing, and the servers kept crashing, and we’re

going ‘Oh god, what’s going on?’” Finally, one of the network programmers pointed out that the combination of a large number of people logging in and the database query running was overloading the server. In their excitement, Sites’ team were DDoSing their own game.

Naturally, they dialed back the database voyeurism. But the players kept coming for many days and weeks after, and the wobbly architecture of the login server continued to be a problem. “The way that we had the server set up, we had to have the login server *physically next* to all the world servers in our data centre,” Sites says. “And we ended up taking three of our customer service reps, putting these poor souls in parkas inside the data centre” – whose temperature sat at around 11 degrees Celsius – “three eight-hour shifts, 24/7, because we didn’t want to have to lose the time when the server would drop. It required a physical restart of the executable, and we didn’t have any sort of remote administration at the time.”

Suffice it to say, then, that *EverQuest*’s creators weren’t prepared for what was about to happen – certainly not on the technical side, as they hurriedly laid down tracks in front of the cultural freight train they found themselves riding, tracks that would go on to define the future of MMORPGs for years to come. But it wasn’t possible to be mentally prepared for this kind of success, either. With the benefit of 20 years of hindsight, however, Sites has had the opportunity to dissect why *EverQuest* proved such an attractive prospect to so many.

Piquing interest with the beta phase was crucial, he believes, as well as being in the right place at the right time, and offering a vast 3D world to explore. But it was mainly *EverQuest*’s uncompromising approach to difficulty that infuriated, intrigued and ultimately hooked players. “We would have these really passionate arguments – and by passionate, I mean lots of swearing and yelling, and people storming out of conference rooms – where we were talking about whether we needed to make death in the game

Andy Sites, designer
and producer on the
original *EverQuest*



“WE KNEW WE WANTED TO
MAKE SURE THAT PEOPLE
WERE PLAYING TOGETHER.
THAT’S THE REASON WHY
PEOPLE ARE STILL PLAYING”

harsher, or certain aspects of it easier,” he says. “But the one thing that we wanted to do was ensure that to really experience the game in its entirety, you needed to group up.” He pauses, and laughs. “My dad was in the Marines, and he talks about all these awful things that happened in boot camp, but he laughs about it. And I hear these same kinds of stories from *EverQuest* players.”

Originally, *EverQuest* required players to undertake ‘corpse runs’ after death, in which they’d try to return to the spot where they fell to retrieve the items and experience they’d lost. It was often next to impossible without the help of strangers on the Internet. “It provided this opportunity to forge these friendships,” Sites says. “At the time, it might have felt a little harsh, and we were really kind of winging it. But we knew we wanted to make sure that people were playing together. That’s what really set us apart. And that’s the reason why people are still playing – because of those experiences that allowed them to meet people in the game and forge these real relationships that were lasting and unbreakable.”

One of those people just happened to be *EverQuest*’s current executive producer, **Holly Longdale**, who these days is in charge of ensuring *EverQuest* stays true to what has always made it special, and setting a course for how the studio – renamed from Sony Online Entertainment to Daybreak Game Company in 2015 – envisions its future. Back in the ’90s, she’d heard that

EverQuest was the next *Ultima Online* and spent around £2,000 building a PC capable of running it. “When I first started playing, it took me three hours to get out of the city,” she recalls. “For those three hours, I was just figuring out my way around, because the designers were clever enough to not be obvious.” *EverQuest*’s global text-chat system proved invaluable in an era where information was far less readily available. Longdale and other players would crowdsource hints and tips via the chat, as well as organise groups and form relationships. “When I finally made it out of the city, I was immediately attacked by things – and someone showed up and saved me. Time after time, players will tell you that everything in the game became so much fun because the players themselves intervene and support each other.”

Longdale graduated from player to guild officer and then to designer, three years after *EverQuest*’s launch. She was armed with firsthand knowledge of what made *EverQuest* so compelling: the sense of discovery afforded by the developer’s confidence in players to work out things for themselves, and the social dependency fostered by the difficulty of the game and complexity of its systems. “The simplest statement is ‘Nothing comes easily in *EverQuest*’, from the beginning to the end,” she says. “We’ve built all of our systems around that social dependency, even now, and we never divert from its core. And when we have, we’ve seen the pain of it – ►

STUDIO PROFILE



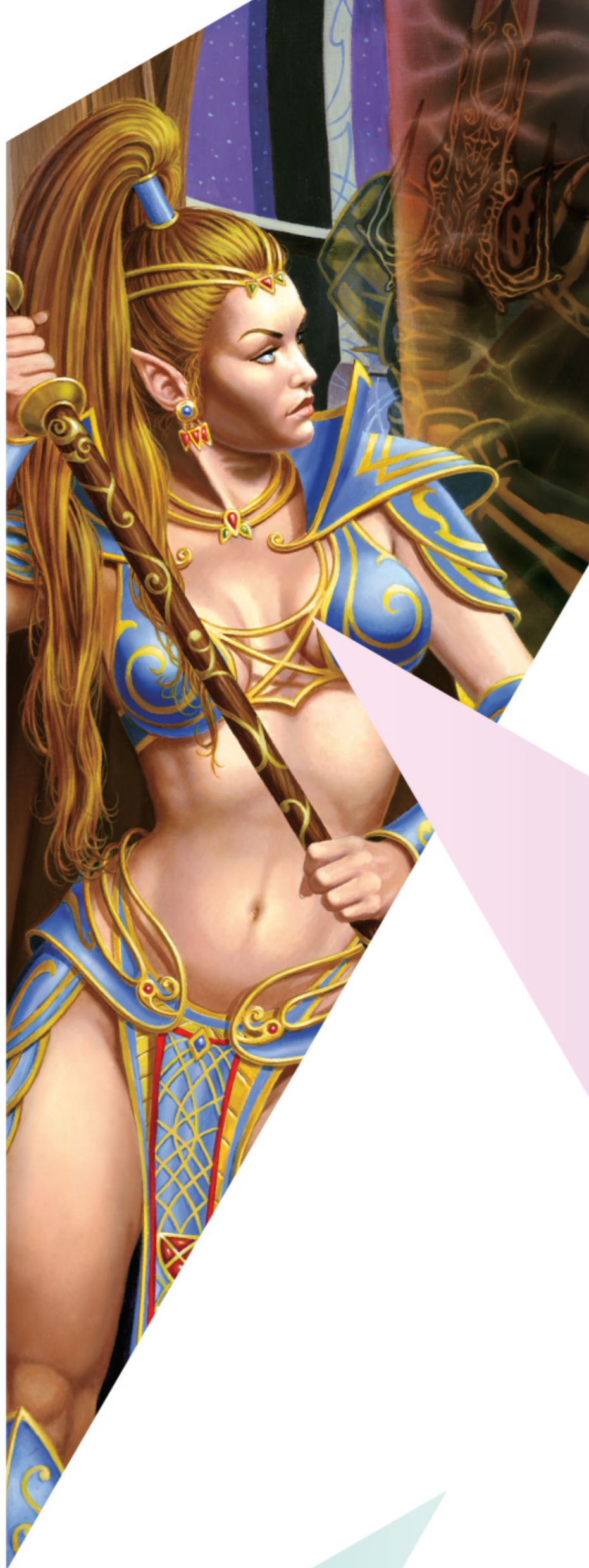
Holly Longdale,
executive producer

it doesn't work. It's not a solo game. While we do want people to be able to do things on their downtime if they're not in groups or guilds, or raids, we don't over-invest, because that's not what keeps people playing and embedded in the community – it's the fact that they need each other to accomplish great things."

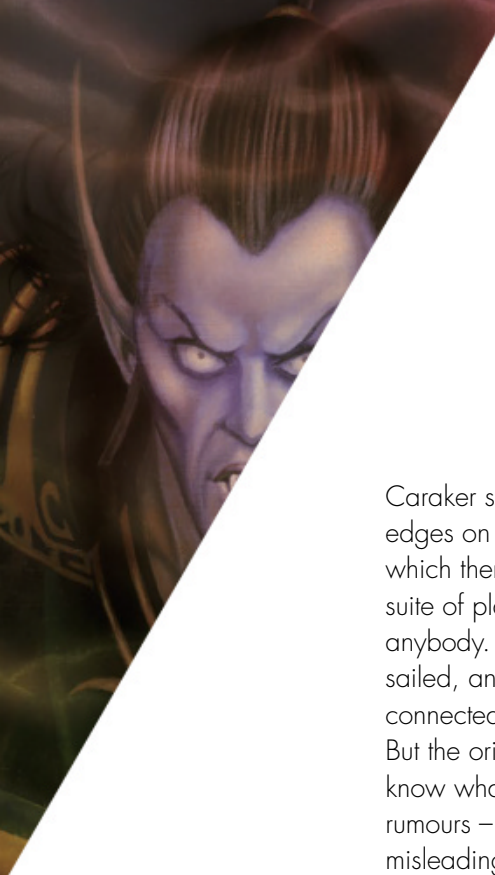
Current lead game designer **Jonathan Caraker** agrees. "I think *EverQuest's* raiding system really set the standard for what raiding looks like in a massively multiplayer online game," he says, recalling how the first raids – a dragon with a breath weapon in a big room, that would drop loot when killed – evolved into sequences of events chained together with lockouts and varied mechanics, and even personal, custom-made dungeons. "We were the first to market with that, the first to iterate on it, and other games have copied. And we still do that – we create handcrafted, puzzle-like challenges for people who really want to take 54 people into a room and solve a complex problem using their abilities and their coordination."

Raids have always been the ultimate manifestation of *EverQuest's* core values. However, as time has moved on and players have become more informed and advanced, Caraker and team's approach to designing raids has had to evolve. The original raids took a day or two to create; nowadays, it's closer to two weeks. Once a year, *EverQuest's* top guilds are now invited to test upcoming raids, and provide ongoing feedback. "These guys have been doing it for years," Caraker laughs, "and we've been doing it for years, so with a little grain of salt, we can usually trust what they're saying. And they know how to communicate with us."

The march of time and technology has made it challenging to preserve the mystique so fundamental to *EverQuest's* appeal. "The original game was a lot about like, exploration and danger and limited resources,"



"I THINK EVERQUEST'S RAIDING SYSTEM REALLY SET THE STANDARD FOR WHAT RAIDING LOOKS LIKE IN A MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAME"



Caraker says. "And I think we've shaved off a lot of the edges on that." Most of *EverQuest's* later expansions (of which there are currently 25) end up launching with a full suite of player-made maps before they're made open to anybody. "I kind of miss the exploration. But that ship has sailed, and it's hard to bring that back. People are more connected, we have the Internet, resources are out there. But the original game was a real frontier, and you didn't know what you were going to get. There were a lot of rumours – some true, some not, some intentionally misleading – that really sent players on some interesting wild goose chases."

But it's people like Longdale and Caraker, people who have two decades of insight into what makes *EverQuest* special, who are best placed to ensure its survival. Caraker, for all his longing for the good old days of ignorance, immediately calls to mind an example of how they've managed to preserve that same spirit in the present-day version of the game with the Epic 2.0 weapon quests. "We were really secretive about how those worked, what you had to do to complete them," he says. "There were a lot of puzzles and hidden things involved. And it was really fun for us."

Longdale, meanwhile, was the key player in Daybreak's formal recognition of Project 1999, a fan-made, not-for-profit emulated server that offers the classic *EverQuest* experience. "The team was like, 'Project 99 is coming out, they're going to be unlocking an expansion that's going to compete with our progression servers, and it sucks, and you should go shut them down,'" Longdale says. This, of course, is usually the course of action for an IP owner with a business to run. But Longdale decided to talk to its makers and listen to what they had to say. "When you get the human side of it, they are literally just our biggest fans. They've given up months, if not years of their time to get the game working so people can play it. And we want that experience preserved, because this is a game about community, it's about our fans, it's about the players. And as long as they're not materially

affecting our business, I couldn't see a reason to not let it happen."

These things are done on a case-by-case basis, Longdale says, but in this situation, the studio was happy to buck the trend. "We've done a lot of weird things," she admits. "*EverQuest* has always been experimental, and you could argue that the industry itself is still an ongoing social experiment. We're a company built on players of the game – so at some point, you need to take a step back from what is logical business sense. We learned this as players: this is a really emotional business. Sure, it's entertainment. But the game delivers emotion, the players feel emotion, they bond with each other – this is a grand social experiment, and we should take care with it, and nurture it in positive ways."

Clearly, the unconventional, more holistic approach has been working. And it's largely due to the retention of people such as Longdale and Caraker, who have a deeply ingrained understanding of what *EverQuest* is and should be, and how to make it work in a business context. Incredibly, the average developer at Daybreak has spent more than a decade on the team. "I don't know if it was coincidence, or serendipity," Caraker says, "But I think that's one of the factors for *EverQuest's* success: having a core group of people that love the game and have been working on it with each other for a very long time. I think we have a lot of the same nostalgia for the game that our players do." We posit the possibility an element of overprotectiveness might prevent certain people from leaving the team. "Yeah! It's like, I wasn't here when the baby was born, but I was here when it was three, so I feel like an adoptive parent."

Indeed, passing the torch is necessary on a project as singular and as successful as this. It doesn't make the process any less emotionally difficult, however, as ►

FUTURE SHOCK

Once upon a time, *EverQuest Next* was thought to be the future of the franchise, presenting a parallel world to Norrath. It would also contain *Landmark*, a world-building tool that would allow players to create their own content. Development was discontinued in 2016. "You look at all the games we've done – they all started with the idea of taking the industry and MMOs to the next level," Longdale says. "*Next* was very much that, and a brilliant idea, no question. But technically, in a lot of ways, it was not solvable in the design that it had." Cancelling it was "hugely painful", she says, "but *Next* was not the evolution of *EverQuest*, either in its content or its format. I mean, when you're talking about a vision for a company and the next big product, fine. But why recreate special sauce or divert from it, right? So the future is more about, 'Let's make the spiritual successor to *EverQuest*'. And what does that mean?"



Sites knows only too well. When he left the team after the Ruins Of Kunark expansion back in 2000 to begin work on *EverQuest II*, he couldn't help but worry about how the game might develop in different hands. "After Kunark came Shadows Of Luclin, which was a super-ambitious and aggressive expansion where they were going to do way more than they should have probably set out to do," he recalls. "We were all looking at it going, 'Wow, they're not going to be able to get this done. This is a mess.'" It was the subject of plenty of jokes (and an unflattering nickname that we shan't repeat here) among his team. "It ended up launching and it was one of the highest-rated expansion packs that released," he says. "And we all ate crow. They pulled it off. There have been so many times that if the team would have listened to the naysayers then they wouldn't have done the amazing things that they ended up doing."

Daybreak's talent for knowing when, and what, to change or preserve is at the heart of *EverQuest's* continued success. While its contemporaries fall over themselves to reinvent themselves and attract new eyes, this team understands and respects the power of nostalgia. A revamp of the game's visuals was quickly abandoned, for instance, when the team realised that so much of *EverQuest's* soul was in its stylised, blocky, blurry art style. And attracting new players is curiously far from the top of the priority list. "We've learned over time not to bother trying to get new people," Longdale laughs. "Our goal is to reacquire people who *have* played. Around

the time I joined the team, nostalgia really became a driving force in the community discussion. So for us, from a business standpoint, we doubled down on that – and our player base is bigger now than it was prior to 2015."

It's been growing ever since, with the team focusing on providing the 'vanilla' feel of the original game with all the quality-of-life tweaks and additions that modern players expect. "There are people all the time, younger people, saying 'I used to watch my dad playing *EverQuest*, 15, 20 years ago'," Longdale says, "and one of our efforts is to make sure people know that it's still alive, it's still a functioning business – it's active development, constant live. For us, the term 'games as service' did not used to be a term!" she laughs. "But we've been doing this for so long, and are experts at churning out content at a pretty rapid pace with a really smart, efficient team."

Is it any wonder, then, that *EverQuest* is still going? These are (still) the people who best understand not only the singular nature of *EverQuest*, but also the MMORPG and games as service. They built the very foundations of them by hand. "When we launched *EverQuest*, it was such a far cry from what online gaming and live services are nowadays," Sites says. "The servers were all physical desktop PCs in metal racks stacked on top of one another. You would pay by the rack in the data centre. So the moment we realised that if we took all the little

THING OF THE PAST

To celebrate the anniversary, Daybreak is releasing a new land, raids, rare items and a questline about preserving the past, all for free. "Again, we're doubling down on nostalgia," Longdale says. "We take storylines that were popular and go back to explore those areas and stories, and develop those parts of the world. This game is deep enough in story that we don't need to invent new continents all the time. And so we're digging down into that and making sure we're always true to *EverQuest's* origins and what makes it special, instead of trying to make new features that veer off into areas that don't support it – which we've done in the past."



"IT'S KIND OF INGRAINED IN US THAT WE SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DO IT THEN, AND WE MANAGED TO – SO WHY NOT DO IT NOW?"

rubber feet off of each of the boxes, we could shove at least one more row of PCs into the very top of it, and save money, and basically add capacity to each of the game worlds? That was groundbreaking."

With no automatic data backup, it had to be done manually: a hard drive failure meant swapping it out by hand – sometimes multiple drives – to save the data. Sometimes players would lose multiple days of progress, and still they came back. The studio was constantly maxing out its bandwidth, to the point where the game would bring down the whole network (including delivery service UPS' global tracking system) and they'd have to expedite an increase. And server updates involved being physically escorted into the data centre by security to run scripts that would push all of the files from a drive to the machines. "Everything was done by hand," Sites says. "starting with the poor bastards that were stuck in the data centre in the parkas – every couple days we would check the Internet browsing history and be appalled at what they were browsing during the middle of the night – to server updates and managing any sort of hardware failures."

Sites is convinced that everyone who's ever been involved in the project has "an ability or a desire to not just give up. First-handedly we managed to figure it all out. Some ways were really innovative and cool, and other ways were popsicle sticks and duct tape – or ripping the rubber boots off the bottoms of each PC to physically jam another rack of servers in. And to this day, the people that I keep in touch with on the team, they don't just look at a problem and go, 'Well, shit, we're screwed'. We don't have this inspiration, like 'Oh, back in the day on *EverQuest* we did this'. But it's kind of ingrained in us that we shouldn't have been able to do it then, and we managed to – so why not do it now?" ■



Jonathan Caraker,
lead game designer

T H E M A K I N G O F . . .



F R O Z E N S Y N A P S E 2

How *Mode 7* returned to the title that put it on the map, and decided that bigger was better

BY ALEX SPENCER

Format PC
Developer/publisher Mode 7 Games
Origin UK
Release 2018

Seven years is a very long time in videogames. When we ask Mode 7 Games co-founder **Paul Kilduff-Taylor** about how the indie game development landscape of 2011 (when the Oxford-based studio found success with the first *Frozen Synapse*) compares to 2018 (when the game finally received a sequel) he gets right to the point: "To some extent, it's unrecognisable."

A lot of the differences have to do with distribution strategy. There's no longer any need to worry whether Valve will pick your game for inclusion on Steam, and courting streamers and social media influencers is just as important as the traditional press. But Kilduff-Taylor identifies one deeper shift that actually affected the way *Frozen Synapse 2* was designed. "You're trying to think about retaining players for a very long time," he says. "That's one of the only ways you can gain traction with a strategy title now." This trend, at least, actually suited Mode 7 pretty well. After all, scope and ambition are key to the titles that inspired Kilduff-Taylor and fellow co-founder **Ian Hardingham** to start making games in the first place.

"I've always wanted to play a game that feels bottomless," says Hardingham, designer and lead programmer on *Frozen Synapse 2*. "Games that have more features than they can really fit inside their box – that's something that's always been very romantic for me." So naturally, the sequel aimed for something much bigger. As for what exactly that would be – Hardingham admits that when the first game came out, "I had no idea what I would put in a sequel" – Mode 7, faced with a very modern set of challenges, found its answer by looking backwards, to two games from the late 1990s.

"The top-level design of the game was 'X-COM: Apocalypse meets *Alpha Centauri*', with the *Frozen Synapse* combat," Hardingham says. That meant taking the turn-based battles of the original game and housing them within a procedurally generated living city, where various AI factions pursue their own agendas. "We've got this amazing combat – now, can we make that the combat layer of a big strategy game?" The pair agree that having this tried-and-tested core in place was a vital foundation for the larger game they wanted to build. "We were starting with something people understand and know," Kilduff-Taylor says. "Tactical combat, units with recognisable weapons, in a top-down



Tactical combat seen in a top-down view is something many players understand immediately, making it accessible

view – that's something that a lot of players can immediately grasp."

This was a lesson the studio had learned with *Frozen Cortex*, the game it made in the time between the two *Synapses*. *Cortex* used a similar aesthetic and turn-based strategy approach, but applied to it to a sci-fi sport rather than military combat. It didn't make the same

"COMBAT IS THE GRAMMAR A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO PLAY GAMES IMMEDIATELY UNDERSTAND"

impact as *Frozen Synapse*, one of the reasons Mode 7 returned to more familiar waters with the sequel – "We thought it was time to be a little more conservative in terms of IP," Hardingham says. Kilduff-Taylor believes misconceptions about *Frozen Cortex* being a game for sports fans might have put off some players. "For better or worse, combat is the grammar that a lot people who play games immediately understand and gravitate towards".

Balls were traded back in for guns, and Mode 7 channelled its experimentation in other directions. Specifically, the melding of tight tactical combat with a more freeform grand strategy game – and making these two layers fit together proved a challenge for *Frozen Synapse 2*. The idea was that each tactical mission would zoom into the city map, taking place in levels lifted straight out of the larger topography.

The technical challenge was quickly met, but that left another, rather important problem: the resulting levels weren't much fun to play. A lot of missions required approaching a building from the outside, across large areas that might be devoid of scenery or threats. "You were getting levels where you'd played eight to ten turns before you had to make a real decision," Kilduff-Taylor says. "That caused a mild existential crisis at the time, and a clash of values between 'this is literally what the level is' versus 'the game needs to be fun for a human'."

The team landed on a number of solutions. The strict five-second limit on turn length could be switched off by the player, so that each turn stretched out as long as units needed to complete the plans you'd laid out for them. How those units were initially deployed by the game was also varied, sometimes dropped right next to or even inside the building, and encounters were occasionally added on the way to a building. Meanwhile, to help players mentally process the larger levels that resulted from this approach – the expectation that players could plan every move, Kilduff-Taylor says, became an annoying effort at this scale – a 'fog of war' was added, concealing areas of the map until they were unlocked. It was a solution that, Hardingham says, "came out of me bashing my head for a long time against this issue of the game not being fun".

Not everything fitted together perfectly, he admits: "The one systemic issue I never managed to get past, and I'm not sure it was possible to get past, was that *Frozen Synapse's* core combat didn't allow us to have as much variety of missions as I would've liked. It's a game based around very quick, very tight combat and that is incredibly important to retain. If you have a game that allows you to have 45-minute missions with a lot of exploration, that allows you to have a much broader palette."

Changing the way *Frozen Synapse's* combat worked would have meant sacrificing the solid foundations its entire city layer was built on. Hardingham accepted it as an inevitability, and moved onto developing the encompassing strategy game. At this level, the main challenge was communicating to the player everything that was happening. The activities of the player and the AI factions all play out in realtime, and trying to keep track of it all can be dizzying. "One problem we had for a really long time was

you couldn't really tell how powerful the factions were, relative to each other," says Kilduff-Taylor. "There was some kind of idea that the frequency of their activity would do it, but frequency is a really hard thing for a human to measure intuitively when there's a lot of data. We hit on this idea called 'shape control' in the game, where the factions expand their territory as they get more powerful. And we also introduced some basic infographics into the game. If you go into the factions tab, you can see how they're doing, and a broad power rating."

There was also the question of how this virtual cityscape would actually look. The first game had established a clear visual style, its scenery and soldiers picked out in sharp neons against a black background, like *Tron* crashing into *Enter The Void*. But how would that translate to an entire metropolis? "The city wasn't just ambitious in scale," says lead artist **Richard Whitelock**. "We also wanted to tread a fuzzy line between boardgame-like perfect abstraction, with obvious places and tokens on one side, and on the other a *Dwarf-Fortress*-like scale that was initially hard to grasp. We vacillated pretty wildly around this line as we figured out how the city would look and function."

Whitelock worked on the original game, and was lead artist on *Frozen Cortex* – experiences which taught him the value of stripping everything back: "The primary thing we learned from *Cortex* was to not set the bar quite so high for the visual fidelity of *Synapse 2*." *Cortex* had fully textured scenes and models with extensive animation; creating these was a huge undertaking for a tiny team. "In retrospect it was wise to play to *Frozen Synapse 2*'s conceptual strengths and always lean towards minimalism and abstraction," Whitelock says. "This is a lesson that kept coming back throughout development – especially when we tried to add extra details or unnecessary layers."

The same couldn't necessarily be said of the game design. Hardingham and Kilduff-Taylor had chosen to embrace maximalism, and if lack of clarity was a side-effect of that approach – well, perhaps it was more feature than bug. "I always have this really ridiculous desire to confuse the player, because I'd like them to feel they're in an endless sandbox," says Hardingham. "Ian has a very interesting way of conceiving of information in games," adds Kilduff-Taylor. "He really likes ambiguity, and the ominous feeling of an out-of-

Q&A

Paul Kilduff-Taylor
Co-founder and joint managing
director, Mode 7 Games



Frozen Synapse 2 was originally slated for a 2016 release, but didn't end up coming out for another two years. What was it that made you decide to push back the game's release date?

It's difficult, but if you're a small company, you can actually afford the luxury of bumping a game until it's ready. And that's something we had to do in order to get *Frozen Synapse 2* into the state we wanted. Literally every game I've ever worked on, or any successful game I've ever heard about, has come out way later than originally intended, and the reason for that is iteration. You can't make all the game design decisions in abstract; you put things in, you try them, they don't work, you iterate, and every time you do that, there's a programming cost that often spirals out to be a long time.

Did you ever consider early access as a way of mitigating that?

What people expect from early access now is basically a finished game that's lacking some stuff around it, or something that's radically new and amazing that they just have to experience right now. And we weren't in either of those two categories at the time when we could have considered doing it. I think, in retrospect, we could have benefitted from doing early access. But that's hindsight, and games only come out in the form they come out. You can't change anything about it.

Is there anything else that, in hindsight, you would do differently?

The main thing for me is that we had some technical issues with the game when it launched. It would have been good to have approached that differently if we could. Can I tell you exactly what we should have done? No. So, even with hindsight, it's not very useful.

control undefined system that you're interacting with. And that's part of the magic of games, particularly the kind that inspire us, like the older DOS-era games, which had this portentous feeling of going into an unknown world."

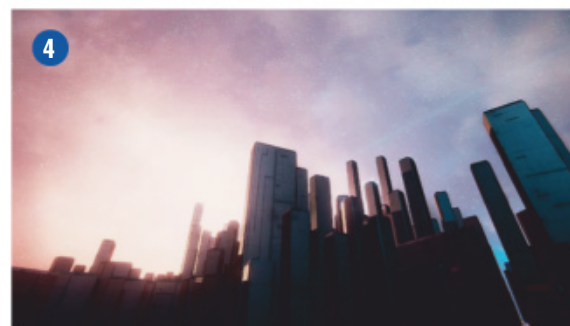
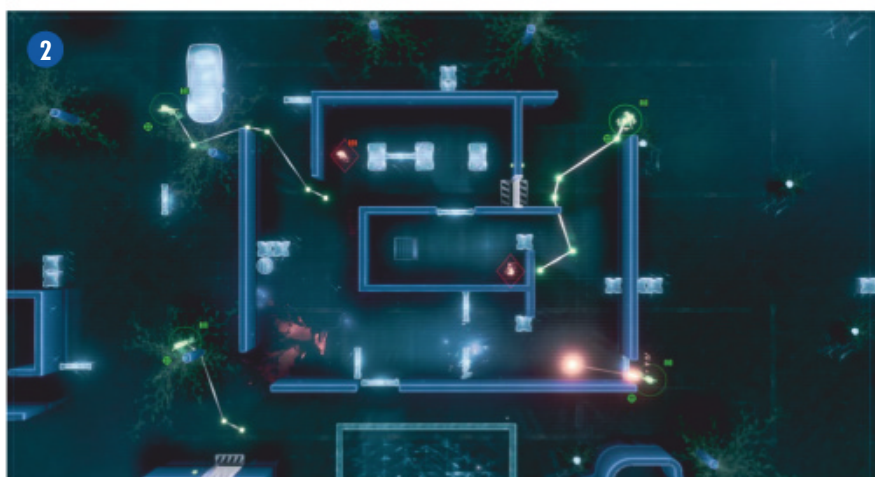
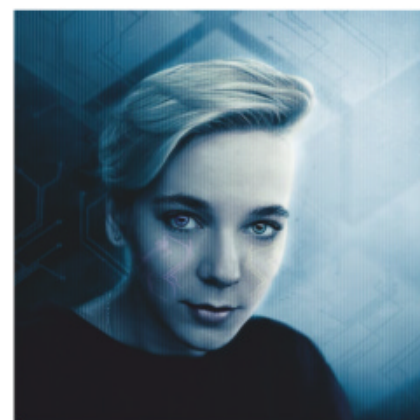
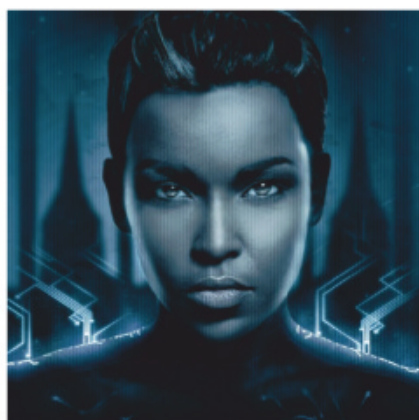
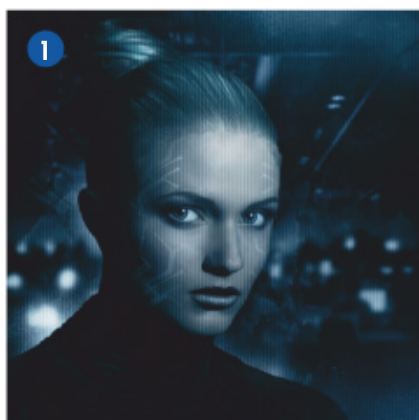
Still, given part of *Frozen Synapse 2*'s conception was an attempt by Mode 7 to be more commercially conscious, the pair realised that confusing players might not be the best idea. It might have been an appealing part of the games that inspired them, but a 2018 audience wasn't necessarily ready to be as patient. "It's a

nice idea to get the player lost in your systems but so many players feel almost insecure if they're not optimising constantly and don't know what they're doing," says Hardingham. "And it's actually kind of sad, because what I want you to do is be able to come into our game and just fuck around, for that to be rewarding and fun – but too many players want to know exactly what they should be doing at all times."

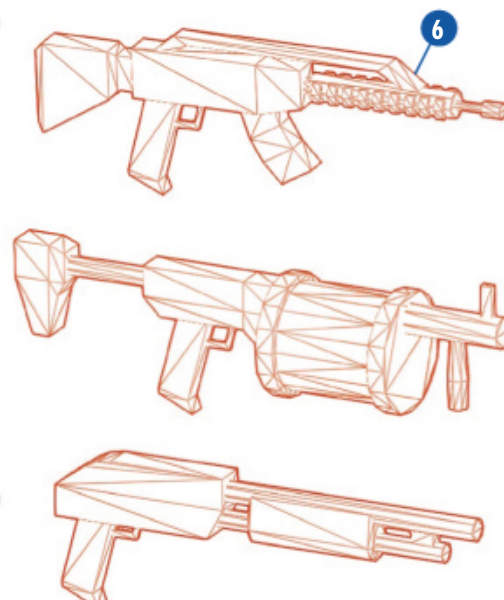
"Player insecurity is a really big deal when you make a harder or weirder game," Kilduff-Taylor adds. "The discussion around that is really poor – a lot of it leans towards the 'git gud' attitude. Either a game has to be so brutally hard that anything you do will kill you and if you don't like that you're an idiot, or else 'I have to understand literally every stat in the game at all times and why aren't you telling me, the developers are lying'. Finding the middle ground here is something you have to do intuitively, and it's really hard to get feedback on that because it ties directly into someone's personality."

Getting the right balance was a theme of *Frozen Synapse*'s development. As Kilduff-Taylor explains, it led to tweaks of the game's design: the relics system, originally the basis of the entire strategy game, was "something we fastened on very early, did a lot of work towards, then kind of abandoned, then came back to again." It ended up being a system they used much more sparingly. Efforts to go deeper on the simulation of how factions interacted with their environment were dropped because it "can result in a lot of stuff that isn't fun or is annoying for the player". Even the inclusion of a linear story was "bounced around an enormous amount", as the team decided how much it should guide the player and how much their experience should be freeform.

As the game developed, the devs constantly found themselves seeking a balance between two opposing desires: between their ambition and the reality of being a two-man team, plus freelancers. Between absolute veracity of the simulation and something that bent the rules to be fun for players; between players craving more information and the game wanting to retain some ambiguity. Whatever else might have changed for indie developers over the years, this need to strike a balance has always been there, Kilduff-Taylor says. "You're still trying to do something that's original enough to stand out but not so much that it's alienating and people can't grab hold of it." ■



1 Kilduff-Taylor says: "I wanted the city to have a feeling of competing ideologies and perspectives, so I wanted a cast of characters that were diverse and more interesting than you might expect to see."
 2 Faced with bigger environments and more action on screen, says Whitelock, "readability quickly became the dominant art pillar".
 3 A key part of *Frozen Synapse's* aesthetic is the synth-heavy soundtrack, also composed by Kilduff-Taylor under the alias nervous_testpilot. For the sequel, he tried to mix the "dark and sparse" elements with a more melodic approach.
 4 Whitelock considered working in more photorealistic elements, but for both practical and aesthetic reasons, this was abandoned in favour of a more abstract look.
 5 The 'vatform' units regenerate between battles. Permadeath was never seriously considered, because units are disposable.
 6 More conventional sequel elements included an expanded arsenal of weapons

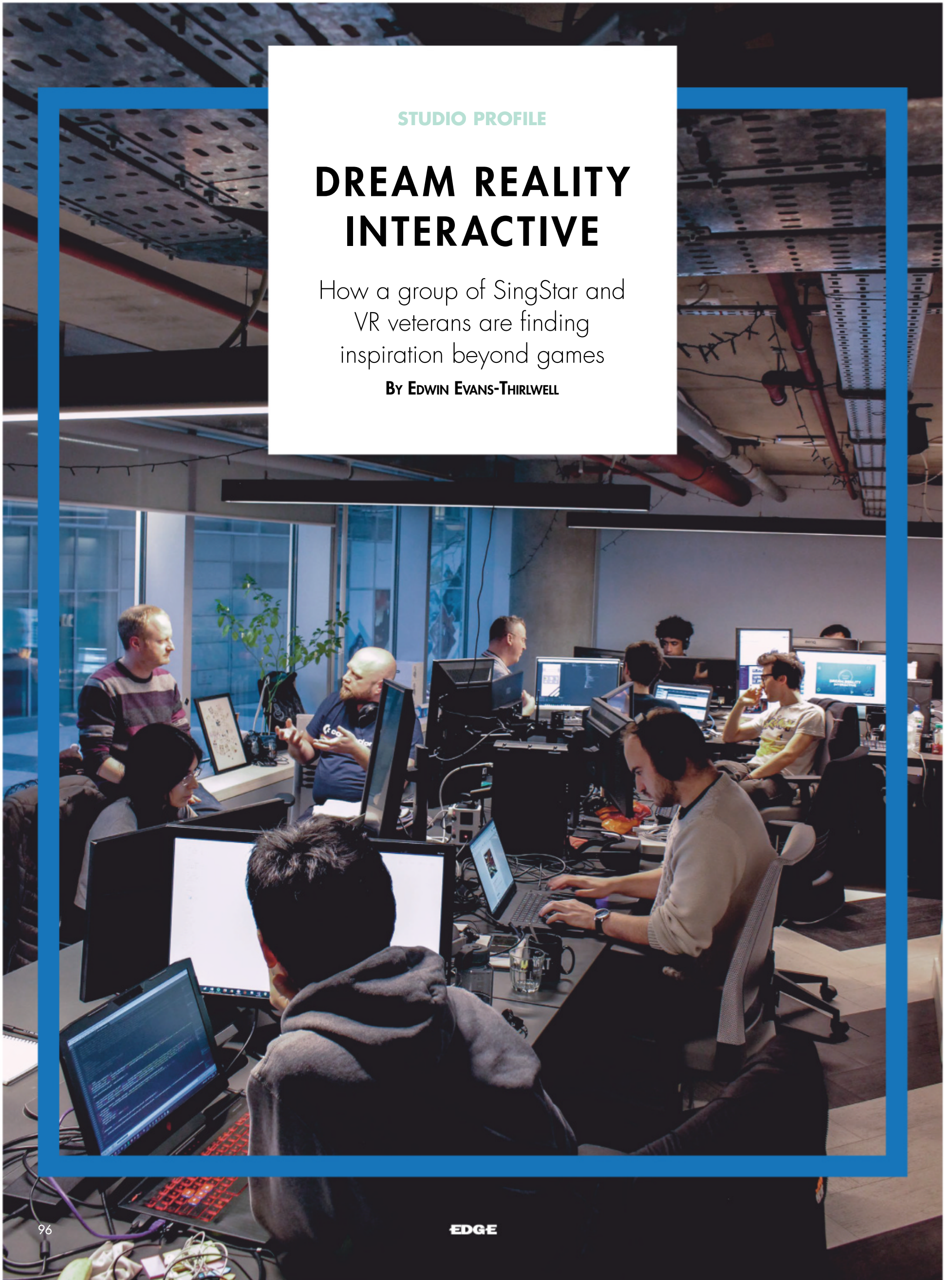


STUDIO PROFILE

DREAM REALITY INTERACTIVE

How a group of SingStar and
VR veterans are finding
inspiration beyond games

By **EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL**



Videogames can be peculiarly hidebound creatures, dominated by conventions that are opaque to outsiders, in thrall to a small collection of pop-culture precedents, from Tolkien to Aliens. One of the less-sung benefits of latter-day virtual and augmented reality technology has been to let in a bit of fresh air – multiplying the points of contact with other artists and industries, all lured by the idea of entertainment platforms that set less store in questions of skill or dexterity. Few developers have embraced this opportunity like Dream Reality Interactive, the White City, London-based independent founded by ex-Sony London studio director **David Ranyard** in 2016.

During its short life, Dream Reality has covered plenty of ground, much of it familiar territory. It has developed a beautiful and usefully platform-agnostic VR maze game, *Arca's Path*, in which players guide an orb with their eyes, and a charming mobile AR puzzler, *Orbu*, in which you slingshot critters around verdant obstacle courses. But it has also looked for collaborators beyond videogames, teaming up with the Natural History Museum and Factory 42 to create the VR app *Hold The World*, in which users handle whale bones and fossils under the eye of a holographic David Attenborough. It has contributed to Bounce Works' *Apart Of Me*, a mobile game designed to help young people cope with bereavement, and is embroiled in a number of projects for healthcare practitioners and educators.

Much of this reflects the polymathic persona and career of Ranyard himself, a garrulous son of Sheffield who has never quite fit the executive stereotype. Before entering the world of gaming as a programmer on *This Is Football*, he ran a vintage clothing store and played in a band, releasing two albums with Warner Bros-owned China Records. Despite leaving school at the age of 16, he also managed to complete a PhD in artificial intelligence at the University of Leeds.

During his 17 years at Sony, Ranyard generally operated on the outskirts of enthusiast gaming, executive producing the decidedly layman-friendly *SingStar* franchise and overseeing headline VR projects at Sony London. Dream Reality's projects obviously draw upon that experience, but Ranyard feels he has more room nowadays to make the most of his many connections and interests. "I think for better and worse, I've become a bit more myself since leaving Sony," he says. "Like



Dream Reality CEO Dave Ranyard (left) spent 17 years at Sony; CTO Richard Bates was at London Studio with him

becoming vegan again, just as an example – maybe in a corporate environment I wouldn't have done that, because it would have been a bit weird in international meetings. I know that sounds a bit trite! If somebody had come to me asking for help with a bereavement game at Sony, I wouldn't have been able to do anything with that, to be honest. It's just not part of the company's ethos."

"WE DO THIS COOL PROJECT, AND WE LEARN A LOAD, BUT THEN WE CAN APPLY IT IN A GAME OR ANOTHER PROJECT"

Dream Reality is the fruit of Ranyard's discussions with two other well-travelled executives – the company's now-departed CFO Kumar Jacob, whose career spans the NHS, Christian Aid and Criterion Software, and Phil Harrison, erstwhile head of Sony Worldwide Studios. Initially, it comprised veterans of Sony's *PlayStation VR Worlds*, among them *SingStar* technical director Richard Bates. But it has swelled in the course of an office move from Farringdon to include younger souls from the realms of film, animation and education, many of them individually sought out and mentored by the company's founders.

The agenda has always been broad. "I was quite conscious when we started of not putting a plan together, of not saying, 'We're going to do one thing, because in three years we think it's going to be really important,'" Ranyard recalls. "Quite a lot of advice you get from venture capitalists is to do that – find that thing everybody's missing and make it." Rather,



**DREAM REALITY
INTERACTIVE**

Founded 2016
Employees 20+ (including part-time staff)
Key staff David Ranyard (CEO), Richard Bates (CTO), Sitara Shefta (head of production)
URL dreamrealityinteractive.com
Selected softography *Arca's Path VR*, *Orbu*, *Hold The World*
Current projects Three unannounced

Dream Reality has built its own identity on the hoof, seeking out partnerships that are both valuable in themselves and an opportunity to explore. "We do this cool project, and we learn a load, but then we can apply it in a game or another project. For me, working with somebody across the table is really interesting."

This readiness to experiment also reflects the continuing unpredictability of the VR and AR market, split across myriad headsets, phones and tablets, with few standout success stories to take inspiration from. "When we set out, we didn't quite know where the magic was going to be, where the commerce was going to be. I think health and education have proven to be

great spaces for VR, but we didn't say 'Right, the first thing we're going to do is VR for education.'" There has been a strong element of following one's gut. "I've probably talked to people in banking about VR, but the conversations haven't gone as far, because inside I'm not as excited," Ranyard says. "I'm sure there's a great VR app you could write for visualising banking data, but I just can't say, 'This is amazing, team, let's do it'. Whereas helping people with health issues, that's something I can get excited about."

For head of art **Laura Dodds**, a National Film & Television School graduate and former children's book illustrator, Dream Reality's work with other industries has been liberating, as has its overall commitment to accessibility. "My background isn't necessarily that strongly in games, and that's true for quite a few people in the studio," she says. "They've come from the NFTS or Goldsmiths University. I think Dave looks for people with quite a varied background, who can bring a wide reference

STUDIO PROFILE



Dream Reality Interactive shares an open plan working space with several tech and media companies, including diversity initiative Colorintech and app developer Studio Graphene

to the projects we work on. So it was a really great collaboration on *Hold The World*; that was a dream project, getting to meet David Attenborough, and getting to work with the Natural History Museum. It was the first one I got my mum to play!

"I think having the gravitas from film and TV has helped us with our VR projects, because there's still a bit of a hang-up [in society] about games and new media," she goes on. "Collaborating with the NHM and David Attenborough, it gives it a broader appeal. A lot of people who I don't think would have necessarily tried VR, did so with that project, and they set it up in a museum, which was great for people who'd never had access to headsets." Alas, one man the developers weren't able to win over was Attenborough himself. "He uses physical mail, that's where he is," Ranyard laughs. "His daughter who travels with him, she has an iPad, but he's not into that stuff. He's very interested in technology, but in his day-to-day life probably less so."

One challenge throughout the studio's various ventures has been finding the balance between conserving resources and making the most of new tech or approaches. The VR and AR markets remain fragmented, with huge gaps in capability between platforms – releasing for several devices is advisable but requires a lot of investment. "That's a side of it that people don't often see," CTO **Richard Bates** notes. "We spend a lot of time getting things running across those platforms. VR in particular is unforgiving in terms of frames, the framerate has to be constant all the way through, so we put a lot of effort into that. Because of the wide nature of things we develop, we have to pick and choose what technology to build and what to borrow." This is

a problem for designers too, of course: the triumph of *Arca's Path* is that it doesn't require a controller and was thus relatively easy to adapt.

"There are some good VR toolkits out there, like VRTK and NewtonVR, but we're also developing our own expertise over the years, and we try to make sure that some of it carries forward from one project to the next," Bates says. "It's very fast-moving." Among Dream Reality's most trusted tools is the Unity engine, not least because the platform has attracted such a variety of talent. "There is a great community out there. A whole range of developers, from students and indies to the big companies in that

monster.'" In Ranyard's view, this is part of an overall shift towards human-computer interaction in 3D space, facilitated as much by the rise of digital AI assistants as VR and AR games. "It's not the traditional, number-crunching database in the background, it's a neural net. The new compute world is going to be based around full 3D and how we input to that with our bodies, with an AI backend that has a more sophisticated, natural way of processing and presenting that information to us."

It's a prospect that may unnerve as much as it enthralls. In the shorter term, the benefit of Dream Reality's cross-industry experimentation

"THE NEW COMPUTE WORLD IS GOING TO BE BASED AROUND FULL 3D AND HOW WE INPUT TO THAT WITH OUR BODIES"

space. It's nice to have that community feeling."

Two years on from Dream Reality's founding, Ranyard and his colleagues have a more precise idea about where VR and AR might be headed. Ranyard suggests that the rise of a popular VR multiplayer game will be a critical tipping point. "I'm trying to predict when that's going to be – 2021, or 2023? – because that is a really important point, commercially and creatively, when you can release a multiplayer game and know you're going to have 2,000 people online at any one time." He's also fascinated by the prospect of characters in VR and AR that don't just look convincing, but actively track and respond to the user's own body language. "I want a character to be looking at you, and for you to say, 'Oh my god, my heart's breaking', as opposed to, 'Ah, it's a

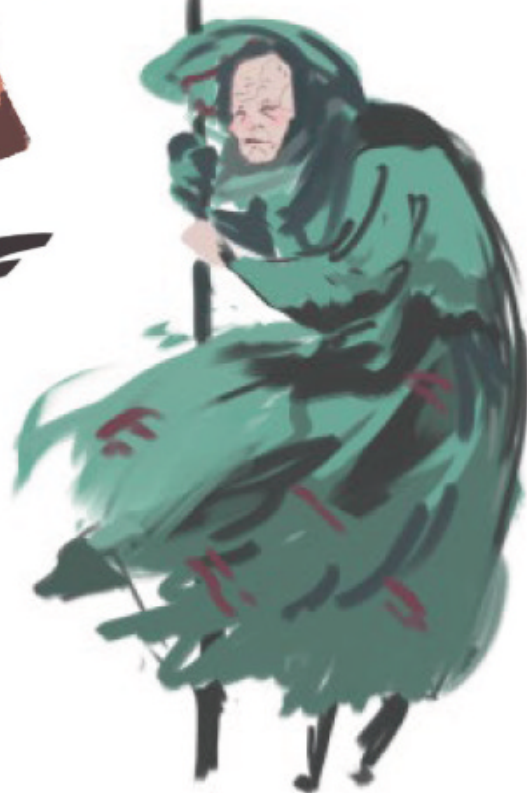
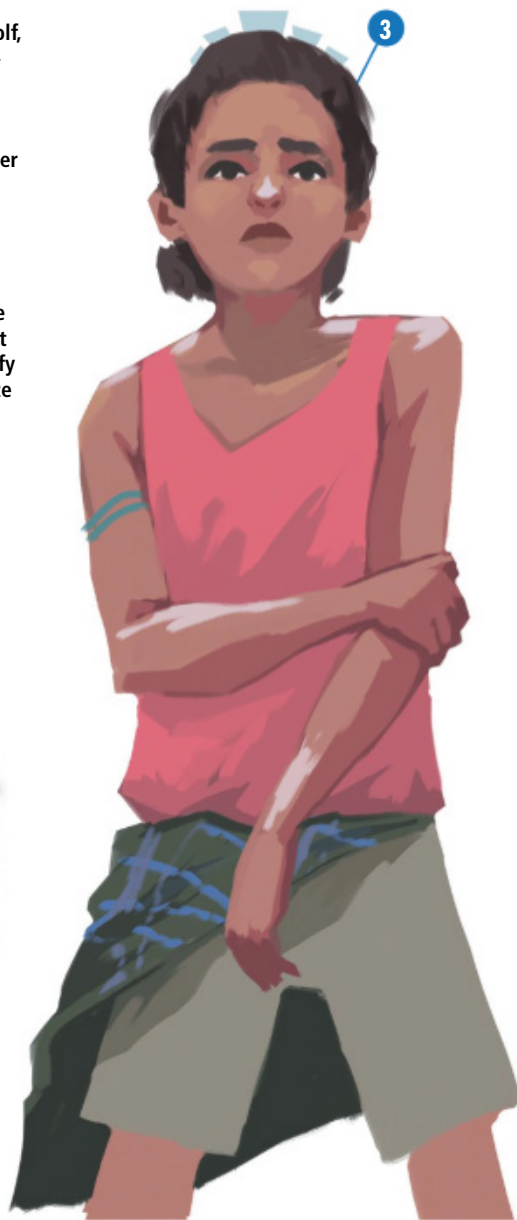
with AR and VR is a broadening of the concept of the videogame itself. "I'm making massive generalisations, but I think sometimes games that focus on delivering very visceral experiences don't leave much space for the player to contemplate and be challenged, engaged in different ways," Dodds observes. Working with creators in other fields, all drawn by the promise of truly "immersive" tech, is a great way for the industry to grow, even if that promise never quite becomes flesh. "When I was younger I wanted to be a cinematographer, and learning lighting and composition is really helpful for games. I don't think that's a revolutionary thing – lots of people have been bringing cinematic language into games – but I certainly find it helpful to look at mediums that are more established, and have already developed languages of their own." ■



1 AR game *Orbu* turns tabletops into stylised Asian gardens. It's essentially minigolf, but has buckets of character – hold your camera up to the ball and it'll wave at you.

2 Game development is a collaborative process even after you've shipped, Laura Dodds says. "You don't really know what you're making until you've got people playing it."

3 An early concept for *Arca's Path* had your gaze tipping the world itself to roll the ball, but Dream Reality opted to simplify things by tethering ball to gaze



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Apex Legends PS4

A game that enforces teamplay is always going to be a reflection of its playerbase, and as Apex has grown so the quality of our matchmade partners has plummeted. If they don't peel off solo at the drop or lead us all to certain doom in a hot zone, they're passive-aggressively pinging as they bleed out, quitting before we can res them, or hoarding all the health pickups like they're preparing for the apocalypse. The rumoured solo mode can't come soon enough. Take these people away from us.

Apex Legends PS4

In a team of friends, however, Apex is less about desperate survival and more an opportunity to wreak hypercoordinated chaos. The Bangalore/Bloodhound combo is devastatingly good, serving up a veritable smoke-covered shotgun buffet, and a team agreement to force-feed your Lifeline player ultimate accelerant means the care package loot – and the wins – flow freely.

Apex Legends PC

And when it all goes horribly wrong, at least there is Twitch. Shroud's stream in particular has become a nightcap of sorts, a showcase of how the game can be played if you're a preternaturally talented player from another planet. At its best, Apex is a lightning-fast game of remarkable drama and momentum, and watching it being played at an elite level is as sphincter-clenching as playing it yourself.

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Explore the iPad
edition of Edge for
extra Play content

SAMSUNG



Thanks to our technology partners for
providing the gear powering Edge reviews

You're moving too fast

This month's Play crop is a bit of a contradiction. Games are all about progress: we expect something new for our money, for more powerful hardware to take us to places we haven't seen before. Yet this month brings an object lesson in the follies of simply racing off toward the horizon without a crystal-clear plan for what to do when you get there.

We had high hopes for *Anthem* (p102), and indeed it has its moments – sporadic little flashes of the brilliance we had hoped for from BioWare's answer to *Destiny*. Yet by and large, the game we'd dreamt of is left to dwell in our heads. It has been rushed out the door, certainly, a technical mess of a game that clearly needed more development time. Yet the game is also built on questionable structural foundations in its design. It's a loot game with boring loot, and nothing of value to do when you get it.

By contrast, *Devil May Cry 5* (p106) is a game of far simpler ambitions: to do what came before all over again, but better, and more beautifully. But this is a series with its own bumpy history. By paying close heed to its own past, the future for Capcom's series looks bright.

So, just give 'em more of what they like, right? Sure, providing you ignore *Crackdown 3* (p110). While charming in places, it is the same charm the first two games gave us on Xbox 360 a decade ago, and a game that exploded onto the scene with a bold promise of a cloud-powered future finally limps over the line feeling more like an earnest tribute act than anything else. If all this shows us anything, it's that game development is no binary choice of sticking or twisting – a shame, perhaps, since that's one area in which BioWare's games have long excelled.



Anthem

Dirge, more like. At its worst, *Anthem* is an unmitigated disaster, a game so beset with problems that it is unfathomable it was deemed ready for release in this state. After battling through the final level, we clip through the floor as the boss begins what we now know was its last stand. We miss the final cutscene, the game instead showing us a loading screen and the legend 'please wait, cinematic in progress'. We load into the results screen, and the game crashes. We have, notionally, finished *Anthem*, but it sure doesn't feel like it. You suspect BioWare knows the feeling all too well.

The misleadingly titled day one patch (it arrives six days after *Anthem*'s launch on the Origin Premier subscription service, by which point we, and thousands of paying customers, are some 40 hours deep) remedies this specific issue, and dozens of others. But many of the game's abundance of problems remain – and were not unique to the game pre-patch, but merely emphasised by it. Loading times were unacceptably long; that they are a little shorter now does not change the fact that there are too many of them, and that the game frequently punishes you for its own leaden-footedness. A maddeningly over-eager catch-up mechanic threatens you with teleportation to your crew if a teammate enters the next part of the mission before you by so much as a second.

There are loads out in the supposedly open world, the game engine incapable of streaming assets for even the smallest of indoor spaces. Exit the tomb or tunnel network the objective marker was pointing you towards, and you must wait while the world at large loads up again. And the way *Anthem* approaches loot, while frustrating enough on paper, becomes simply infuriating when you factor in the load times. Loot drops in open play communicate only the rarity of an item; to see the specifics you need to either finish your current mission, or quit out of it. To then equip your new toy, you'll need to load back to the Forge, an inventory screen where loadouts are managed. To test it out, you'll need to then cue up an activity via the Fort Tarsis hub, itself a loading screen away; if you don't like it and want to swap it out, you'll need to repeat the entire process.

It's a drag, but in reality it's easy to avoid, since loot is profoundly unexciting until you hit the level cap of 30. Guns are weedy, and the single-digit power increase a new toy affords is never particularly obvious in the hands. In a way, that's fair, since guns are not the focus here. Ability cooldowns are much shorter here than in, say, *Destiny*, meaning your Javelin's powers are the body copy of the game's language, rather than its punctuation. New ability drops suffer the same deflating fate as the weaponry – a stat increase here, a perk tweak there – but at least their impact in battle is more noticeable.

Developer BioWare
Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4 (both tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

The thrill of the elemental assault rubs up awkwardly against the weedy pew-pew of the weaponry

That's putting it mildly, in fact. In the thick of combat *Anthem* is a riot of colour, sound and light, your squad of four putting on a relentless elemental firework display that takes the breath away even before the ultimates start flying. There's often a disconnect between presentation and effect – a spectacular move barely denting the health bar of a sentry turret, say – though things improve markedly once you learn to exploit the combo system. Use a Primer ability to set the combo up, trigger it with a Detonator, and a delicious sound effect heralds a much more damaging attack. It's one of the most satisfying things in the game, and perhaps the most vital – making it all the more baffling that at no stage does BioWare explain it to you. The inventory icons that denote Primers and Detonators are small and easy to miss; there's nothing about them in the sprawling tutorial section of the pause menu. The effect doesn't always trigger, either. But when it works, *Anthem* really, finally sings.

Combat may be a mixed bag – the thrill of the elemental assault rubbing up awkwardly against the weedy pew-pew of the weaponry – but movement is delightful throughout. The chafing umbrage at the lengthy load into a mission fades away the instant you take flight by clicking the left stick at the peak of a jump. You will soar and swoop, pull off some pixel-perfect moves and mess up many more, your eyes scanning the scenery for a body of water to cool down your suit's thrusters and extend your flight time. For all the game's problems, and the pervading sense that its makers have failed to understand what makes this kind of game tick, the flight system is a triumph – both in its execution, and what it adds to the genre. Loot games naturally suffer in the moments where there are no new toys on offer. How do you make the time between lever-pulls as engaging as fights themselves? By making movement this much fun.

There's genre savvy, too, in the way that the game's four classes of Javelin mech suits are tied to a single pilot protagonist. This means there's only the one progression curve to climb; you can move freely around the four suits as they unlock, or main one of them through to endgame then swap over without needing to level them from scratch. Each Javelin has a defined role at which it excels, but there's surprising scope to bend the rules, the possibilities for different builds unfurling as your arsenal expands. As Storm, we spend much of the campaign at range, flinging spells down from the skies. Early in the endgame, a single loot drop prompts a change in approach, our new build preferring not to engage until we see the whites of an enemy's eyes.

All told, the mechanical side of the game works well, and this is a pleasant surprise given that BioWare has always been more of a raconteur than an action hero. *Anthem*'s story is hardly the studio's best work, but it ►



RIGHT Ultimates are one thing that BioWare definitely gets right; the thrill of ripping away a chunk of health bar with a spectacular Storm ult is a consistent highlight.

BELOW We may have missed the final boss fight to a crash bug, but we've seen it plenty of times since, 'thanks' to BioWare repurposing it as one of the three Strongholds.

MAIN It's truly remarkable how suddenly weapons become interesting as soon as you start picking up Masterworks. If only they'd been around a little earlier



ABOVE The campaign is engaging, and will continue so long as the game survives long enough to warrant it. BioWare's current engagement strategy appears to involve changing the generosity of loot drops every few days





certainly bears its signature: the story is well crafted and easy to follow, its characters likeable and fleshed out (if all a little too cocky and light-hearted given the perilous situation they face). We'd wondered, going in, how the studio would square the circle of a game thick with narrative that's designed to be played as a squad. Suffice it to say it simply doesn't. You'll miss mid-mission exposition while a teammate complains about their working day, while the sense of a functioning unit working to save the world rather falls apart when everyone loads back into their own private Fort Tarsis.

Still, it all just about hangs together, at least when the glitches aren't pulling it apart. Mission design throughout the campaign has little to add to the co-op shooter formula – go to this place and kill these things, pick up these doodads and carry them over there, stand in this circle shooting while a progress bar fills – but there's just enough pep and drama in the combat to keep you pushing on. Throughout you will curse load times, wish you could access your inventory mid-mission and occasionally have to hard reboot your console, but it's a satisfying enough time until the credits roll. Thereafter it's a case of mopping up sidequests, delving into the Strike-like Strongholds, and tooling around in Freeplay until you hit the level cap, and the real meat of the thing – the endgame – can reveal itself.

Or, you know, the other thing. *Anthem's* endgame is paper-thin, with just three Strongholds, randomly spawning Legendary Contract sidequests, and a barren Freeplay mode the sum total of what's on offer. The Grandmaster difficulty tiers that open up once you hit level 30 are for masochists who like being one-shot by enemies they didn't know were there (the game has a



GAIN RELIEF

While the loading times and crashes make for a painful time for players who want to sprint to the level cap, a novel XP system means there's surprising scope for optimising the time you do get to actually spend playing the game. Experience isn't just earned by completing activities, but by earning medals that reward you for playing in certain ways. There are multiple tiers for each one, too, ensuring that the melee-focused Interceptor, for instance, isn't unduly punished for sticking to what they do best. Further incentive for playing the field comes through challenges, which task you with racking up kills or completing missions with individual gear pieces, and unlock progressively more powerful crafting recipes as you go. In places, beneath all the problems, lies the seed of a smartly thought-out game.

Titans are the late game's signature enemies, and are in the habit of dropping good gear. Just as well given how long it takes to put one down, though in fairness a patch in deadline week has made them a bit squishier

tremendous problem communicating incoming damage) and offer rewards that are hardly worth the suffering. Masterwork-tier gear pieces are reskinned versions of what you've already spent 25 hours picking up, with a unique perk and more stat-boosting affixes; Legendaries are simply Masterworks with stronger effects. This makes for a vanishingly small loot pool of only 27 guns to chase down. Once you've got one of each, the only thing that matters are the affixes, and the loot game far too quickly stops being about toys and starts being about the tiny numbers that come with them. That is nowhere near good enough for a game that is meant to be played endlessly.

Yet at launch, the game's biggest problems are its bugs: the aforementioned absent ending, the crashes and performance hitches, and on PS4 at least, the ability to forcibly reboot your entire console, a bug of such frightening might and reach that you have to sort of respect it. There's not much that isn't fixable, but equally there's little that's excusable. We may be used by now to the idea that a game of this type is never really complete; that the picture today will be very different in a year, and will have vastly changed again after another 12 months. But that does not mean you get to launch a mess, then call the clean-up operation progress. The game's flying mechanic may be a delight; raining elemental chaos down on enemy goons, a pleasure. Yet the lasting impression is of a game that, for all its charms and potential, simply wasn't quite ready for takeoff – and that what might have been won't arrive for a couple of years yet.

Post Script

What hope is there for a loot game that doesn't understand the thrill of the chase?

There is a widely held suspicion that *Anthem* was not the game BioWare wanted to make. That it was toiling away on another of its signature singleplayer RPGs when EA, green-eyed at the engagement numbers Activision was touting for *Destiny*, enforced a genre switch on the studio. Certainly this is a game of contradictions, that often gives the impression it either used to be, or would prefer to be, a more traditional BioWare game. Yet that alone does not explain away all the game's problems.

Nor does the Frostbite engine EA has spent this console generation pushing its internal studios to use, though it offers a plausible explanation for some of *Anthem*'s issues. It is easy to see why a game engine designed for *Battlefield*'s sprawling deathmatches would struggle to carry a fully open world, hence those loading screens. Perhaps it also explains why loot cannot be inspected and equipped the moment you pick it up – something promised by the original announcement trailer – and why we cannot fiddle around with our loadouts during loading screens (a *Destiny* feature we never truly appreciated until it was taken away).

Anthem's real problems lie much deeper. This is a game that borrows liberally, and often brazenly, from the most popular looters around – among them *Destiny*, *Diablo III* and *Warframe* – without seeming to understand what makes those games work. *Anthem* is a loot game that gets loot wrong, and that is a far greater concern than any loading screen or crash bug. This is an established genre, with fundamental principles, and any developer seeking a slice of this potentially very lucrative pie ignores them at its peril.

First, loot should be exciting from reasonably early on, since it is what keeps people playing, and coming back for more. Developers can reasonably assume that the large part of the playerbase will simply play through the campaign and then quit; that a smaller portion will carry on, mopping up sidequests until they either run out of things to do or hit the level cap; and that a smaller number still will push on into the endgame, replaying missions and quests in the endless hunt for the most powerful gear. All need an incentive to keep playing. A good loot system turns the campaign player into a level-cap one, and potentially an endgame one too.

For that, new gear must be able to be viewed and equipped the second it drops – with some exceptions. *Diablo III*'s Legendaries, like *Destiny 2*'s Prime Engrams, must be taken back to town and decrypted, and there is a tantric sort of thrill in waiting to learn the precise nature of a drop you know to be powerful. Arguably *Anthem* could do the same with its higher tiers of gear, Masterwork and Legendary. But not with the common-grade items that are still dropping regularly for us over

50 hours into the game.

Next, loot should be about empowering playstyles, not just making numbers go up. While *Anthem*'s combo system inherently invites a degree of experimentation, it is not enough by itself to keep players on the hook for hundreds of hours. Too much of its loot game is about gear pieces that offer minor percentage boosts to other slots; a 13 per cent increase to an ability's cooldown is nice to have, sure, but it should not be the focus of the loot grind until the very end of the game, when committed min-maxers are seeking to optimise specific builds. The more successful games in this genre give players a peek behind the late-game curtain, by making high-tier gear available much earlier on in small quantities. In *Diablo III*, Legendaries can drop in your first hour; in *Destiny 2*, you are given one Exotic weapon and armour piece for progressing through the campaign. In doing so you not only give players fun new ways to play, but also hint at what could be theirs if they stay the course. The closest *Anthem* comes to this is a Legendary scout rifle, exclusive to the game's special edition, that appears to shoot frozen peas and whose principal benefit is a boost to your Luck stat, increasing drop rates of the game's miserable low-tier loot.

Optional higher difficulty levels can provide a meaningful incentive for committed players to stick around – something *Diablo* does wonderfully well with its dozens of Greater Rift tiers, and which *Anthem* seeks to ape with the three Grandmaster settings which unlock once you hit its level cap. But difficulty only works if your action game is rock-solid; being one-shot-killed is one thing, but having it done by something you couldn't see coming is another thing entirely. And the rewards must be commensurate with the effort involved – something *Anthem*'s GM difficulties failed to offer even before a seemingly severe nerf to drop rates was hidden in the day-one patch. Rates should never be used as a way to paper over an absence of meaningful things to do. If, a week after launch, players are running out of things to do, it's not because your drop rates are too generous. It's because you didn't give them enough to chase in the first place.

Games of this kind are often presented as being about numbers, but in fact they are about feelings. The dopamine rush of a powerful drop; the fire of synapses as you inspect it, consider its implications and build around it; and then the thrill of testing it out, knowing that you're making the hunt for the next new toy both easier and more fun. Given all the bugs in the game at launch, BioWare perhaps has more pressing matters on its to-do list. But if it does not solve its loot problem, the next few months of patches will be for naught. ■

Loot should be about empowering playstyles, not just making numbers go up



Devil May Cry 5

Ah, merry old London — the red phone boxes, the plastic garden furniture, the road signs and erm, the demonic tree-thing whose gigantic spiked branches have torn all those grand old buildings to shreds. Red Grave City isn't *quite* London as we know it, but the inspiration is obvious, and we spend a little too much of *Devil May Cry 5*'s opening hours playing this fast-paced action game completely wrong, not sprinting but strolling, gawking at familiar roadside furniture and Tube-station ad posters. Capcom researched England in surprising depth, as we explained in *E326*'s cover story, though perhaps it missed a few of the finer details. Nice as it is to see a dinged-up Transit van in a rotten hellscape, we could have done without the road sign pointing towards the local 'beer factory'.

The real disappointment, however, is how fleeting it is. *Devil May Cry 5* may be grounded in a reality pleasingly close to home, but it doesn't stay there for long. A little too much of the game is spent running around on bits of demon tree, as our protagonist trio descends deeper and deeper to cut the infestation off at the source. This is a handsome game, starring three handsome men: Dante the silver-haired badass; Nero the young beefcake; V the heavily tattooed, rake-thin goth repping the SoundCloud generation. All are wonderfully rendered and animated, the RE Engine proving itself highly capable once again. If only the backdrops were of the same high quality throughout.

Still, that's a rare black mark on a thrilling action game that, while faithful to its roots, innovates on the series formula in some delightful ways. Perhaps the most effective is that Dante no longer feels like the out-and-out star, his two playable companions every bit as enjoyable to take into battle as the man around whom this series has been built. There are three very different playstyles on offer here: Dante, up close and personal, a whirlwind of stylish aggression; Nero a more considered, tactical kind of brawler; and V a vaguely slapstick summoner who does his best work when running away from trouble.

Nero, who carried the first half of *Devil May Cry 4* while only ever feeling like the warm-up act, has been greatly fleshed out here, though it's a particular absence of flesh that most defines him. His Devil Breakers, mechanical prosthetics made from bits of defeated demons by Nico, an NPC ally who is approximately 95 per cent midriff — the other five is a permanently curled top lip — give him a level of flexibility in combat second only to Dante himself. Some Breakers offer devastating attack power up close, others pin enemies down from range, and others still afford greater mobility. And while you can take a certain number into battle, their order in your loadout is key. They can't be switched between, the next only equippable once the current one is destroyed.

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

Reaching and maintaining a coveted SSS rank will require a near-perfect mix of planning, execution and reactions



V represents an even greater departure from the series template, since he attacks using summonable pets. The crow-like Griffon moves in from the air, unleashing furious electrical attacks in among its talon swipes. The ground-based Shadow is a teleporting big cat that turns itself into a whirlwind of demonic spikes. And where Dante has his Devil Trigger, V has Nightmare, a hulking colossus that forces bosses to pick on something their own size, and simply lays waste to everything smaller. While the minions do the wet work, you need to keep V safe, moving in only to administer the killing blow on enemies, which the pets can't do themselves. Keeping him out of harm's way is easy enough in open play, since he's as mobile as Nero or Dante. Yet he can refill his Nightmare gauge by reading aloud from a book of demonic verse — which slows his walk dramatically, and will be cut off by a jump or dodge. V offers an entirely new way to play *Devil May Cry 5*, and honestly quite a silly one. We love it.

And then, of course, there is Dante. Director Hideaki Itsuno knows better than to mess with such a proven formula, and so this is essentially the *DMC3: Special Edition* character with bells on. His four styles are switchable in realtime with D-pad directions; melee weapons are rotated with the right trigger, and guns with the left. Cycling through them all, watching the sparks fly as you climb the style ranks is, as ever, a delight, rendered even more so by the RE Engine kicking into seemingly ever higher gears as things get more and more absurd. V and Nero are more than capable companions, but the game is nonetheless at its very best when Dante takes centre stage — particularly late on, when Itsuno adds a thrilling new dimension or two to his most beloved creation.

Devil May Cry has always been a frighteningly technical game, and that's certainly the case here: reaching and maintaining a coveted SSS rank will require a near-perfect mix of planning, execution and reactions, as always. Yet rarely has the series felt quite so welcoming. While move lists are enormous, the most complex input in the game is back then forward on the left stick, and its most spectacular moves are performed by simply holding down a face button. It's a wonderfully generous game, one that rewards the novice button-masher with a raucous spectacle, then offers even more to those prepared to experiment.

With all that's going on in the foreground — a relentless firework display of alpha effects, hit pauses and demons being cleaved in twain — perhaps it's churlish to complain too much about the quality of the backdrops. London's influence may fade a little too soon, but this is a right old knees-up from start to finish, a classic reborn in wonderful style. Capcom's hot streak continues apace.



ABOVE Nico's a relic, if not in her sexualisation then in the fact she always has a fag on the go. She has her moments, though: we like the way she eagerly pounces on loose bits of demon corpse to make new weapons from

MAIN In this series, the real fireworks begin in the air, and Nero finds it easier than most to stay up there thanks to a grapple move that pulls enemies towards him.

ABOVE Boss battles are spectacular, and comfortably the series' best. Some appear designed around specific Devil Breakers or Dante styles, though you can generally use what you're comfortable with.

RIGHT The intricacies of the Devil Breaker system will likely be lost on you for your first playthrough, and that's seemingly as intended. It's on later visits, when you know the enemies you'll face and the best ways of dealing with them, that the system comes into its own





The game practically insists on at least a second playthrough, with Nero's toolset irresistibly expanded at game's end

Post Script

In praise of a publisher in new-found love with its past

Capcom spent the early part of the current console generation mired in something of an identity crisis. Like much of Japan's game industry, it spent the 360 and PS3 era trying to make games that appealed to the west, mostly unsuccessfully. It began the PS4 era with some of its most famous series in difficult places. What was *Resident Evil* after 5 and 6? What was *Devil May Cry* after *DMC4* and *Ninja Theory's* game? A few short years later, those questions have been answered in style.

And as so many of its Japanese peers have found, the answer has lain in a return to basic principles: to make games that are true to their host series, rather than titles that seek to appeal to some imagined global audience. And, in so doing, worldwide success has followed. Well, largely. *Street Fighter V* remains the exception that proves the rule, a game built for the masses that ignored it, since refashioned into something its hardened players have learned to accept, if never quite love. Yet in *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard*, *Monster Hunter: World* and now *Devil May Cry 5*, Capcom has shown the benefits of staying true to your roots.

In *DMC's* case, the result is a game that feels like a breath of fresh air despite how clearly it is rooted in its own past. It largely

follows the shape and structure of the 15-year-old *Devil May Cry 3*. You kill enemies for red orbs to spend on new moves; you defeat bosses for new weapons to make killing enemies for red orbs feel different and more fun. It is a game about stylish, flexible combat, just like always, that is made immeasurably more stylish and flexible by the advances in videogame technology that have occurred since the template was first laid down. This is not rocket science. No, it is something far more magical than that.

It feels all the more so in the context of the contemporary game industry. There was no baffling PowerPoint slide to explain all the special editions and early-access options across different platforms. There is no levelling curve to climb, no endless endgame to keep you coming back day after day; it is a game that can be blitzed through in a weekend and replayed only for the love of it. There is no Season Pass. Following the game's announcement last summer, there was a brief, worrying spell in the headlines when it emerged that microtransactions would feature. The final game contains a remarkably well-hidden option to speed up the rate at which you unlock new moves. We had to go looking for it, and the game hardly feels balanced towards it. We watch the credits roll

with only the most expensive of each of the three characters' available moves still locked off – and it's clear these are carrots to simply keep playing the game, something to chase on a second playthrough rather than punishment for not getting our wallets out.

And where there are concessions to modern convention, they do anything but follow the crowd. There is multiplayer here, but it is weird and silly and actually quite easily missed, the game bringing another human in as a character you're not playing to do battle in an adjacent room. It is not so much multiplayer as it is voyeurism, an incentive to polish off your battle in short order so you can check out the one going on next door, rating them as 'Stylish!' – or not; some people are *rubbish* – at level's end.

Yes, there are times where the game's old-fashioned spirit is more blessing than curse. Its women are mere props, there to be gawked, leered or laughed at, as much part of the background furniture as any transit van or Tube sign. And the way it handles loading – into a cutscene then a mission menu, then in and out of customisation screens before finally letting you loose – is old hat in an era of fast texture streaming. But this is *Devil May Cry*, pure and simple, and its hackneyed missteps are all for the greater good. ■

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Crackdown 3

The story of *Crackdown 3*'s development will one day be told, and it's a copper-bottomed guarantee that it'll be more fascinating than the game itself.

Whatever happened, surely this isn't what was planned. *Crackdown 3*'s one big idea — its vaunted cloud-based realtime destruction — adds little to a limited and weirdly generic multiplayer mode, while the singleplayer campaign seems to have settled for even less. It's *Crackdown*, but in higher resolution and with improved draw distance, and only the least demanding of players could realistically be fully satisfied with that. For better and worse, *Crackdown 3* almost entirely ignores the way the open-world genre has evolved in the 12 years since the original. It doesn't feel as if it's been developed in a bubble so much as a time machine.

This throwback approach has its advantages. There's a single-mindedness to *Crackdown 3* that taps into a similar brand of immediate gratification to the *EDF* games, though it's less ambitious and spectacular in the scale of its mayhem. But it hardly stints on the carnage. By the end of the game, when you're picking up vehicles and throwing them into explosive tanks to destroy clusters of robot guards, it feels like almost everything around you is on fire — usually including yourself.

Until then, your job is simple: as a super-powered agent, you're asked to liberate the gaudy, gleaming city of New Providence from villainous megacorporation TerraNova. In doing so, you'll expand your own territory, opening up supply caches and fast-travel points (for once that isn't false advertising; you're spirited there in moments). Whether you're freeing civilians, capturing monorail stations or destroying industrial plants, it tends to involve keeping your finger pressed down on the right trigger, pausing only occasionally to dodge a hot laser beam or a boulder hurled by some mechanical brute. It helps that you don't really have to aim: the lock-on doesn't always prioritise threats well, but it attaches itself to targets like a limpet, letting you bounce and roll around to your heart's content, as their health bar quickly drains to nothing.

Each mission contributes to the downfall of a local lieutenant. There are a few mandatory quests and many more optional ones, but it doesn't take much to draw out and eliminate these mini-bosses, moving you up the chain of command. But while, say, *Mafia III* or *Shadow Of Mordor* had you completing dozens of copy-pasted quests over the course of several hours, you'll expose TerraNova's kingpins much more quickly: *Crackdown 3*'s action may be similarly one-note, but at least it doesn't feel the need to drag things out with arbitrary level gating. Each objective has a survival rating, determining your chances of success, but progression is permanent — die and it's a short trip back to the frontline where you can carry on where you left off. You might be too underpowered in the early game to tackle some of these,

Developer Sumo Digital, Elbow Rocket
Publisher Microsoft Game Studios
Format PC (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Almost entirely ignores the way the open-world genre has evolved in the 12 years since the original



JUMP AROUND

If you fancy a break from all that shooting, there are rooftop checkpoint races to compete in, though you'll comfortably smash those gold medal times by the time you've got two mid-air dashes and a portable launch pad. TerraNova's propaganda towers, meanwhile, host platforming challenges that see you scaling vertiginous heights — and they're a little more involved than *Assassin's Creed*'s vertical traversal. But while some are smartly assembled, others require too many blind jumps, the camera doing you few favours. The distance you can cover while jumping and dashing is such that vehicles are almost irrelevant — the same was true of *Saints Row IV*, though that did the superhero fantasy thing with more wit and wanton chaos. There are driving events here, too, but given Sumo's genre experience, they're surprisingly dull.

but after a short while you'll have sufficient firepower to give them a shot. That's certainly true once you've got your hands on the pulse beam, a ludicrously powerful high-capacity laser that can cut through almost anything with ease. With a few exceptions, you'll rarely feel the need to switch, especially with a portable ammo field equipped to your grenade slot — though that's hardly necessary given how many supply crates you'll find in and around your objectives.

Progress is swift, then, not least since your abilities are upgraded automatically through play. There are no skill trees to think about; unlocking a double-jump and a ground-pound, new weapons, grenades and vehicle types all comes organically. Up to a point it depends on your playstyle — if you use guns rather than melee attacks then that's what you'll unlock soonest, but you'll steadily gain experience in the others regardless. It does, however, pay to take a bit of early time out to grab those green agility orbs. By the time you've got a couple of hundred, you'll be able to clear mid-sized buildings in, well, a couple of bounds. Good job, too, as traversal is otherwise slightly sticky. Sidling along ledges and leaping between handholds is bizarrely slow, but necessary at prisoner hardpoints and vehicle lockups where you need to follow cables to batteries powering the energy gates that contain your targets.

Still, these are the only points where you feel a sense of connection to this pretty but synthetic world. Bodies and vehicles might be sent flying by the force of its explosions, but every major structure is untouched. That's disappointing enough, but the multiplayer — developed separately by Elbow Rocket, and which *does* feature the cloud-powered destruction engine — is an even bigger letdown. There are two modes: a version of *COD*'s Kill Confirmed, where the first team to collect 25 medals from downed enemies wins, and Territories, a bog-standard King Of The Hill variant. While you can destroy certain walls and floors, the foundations of the buildings here also remain intact. And given that it borrows the campaign's mechanics, the outcome of any shootout is almost always determined by which player locked onto their rival first. Deploying your single bonus ability — a vertical boost or a temporary shield — occasionally lets you escape death, but as a tactic it's only useful if your opponent hasn't done the same.

The flimsiness of the multiplayer casts a harsher light on the campaign's brevity. At around 12 hours, *Crackdown 3* might respect your time, but in its lack of ambition, it's hard to argue that it's worth the money — you could say it's the perfect advert for Game Pass. We'd be lying if we pretended we didn't have some fun with it. But it only works in the same way a McDonald's occasionally hits the spot: this is cheap, junk-food gaming that comes with a side-order of regret.



ABOVE Collect enough of the orange orbs dotted about the map in Wrecking Zone and you can enter Overdrive mode, which boosts either your Agility and Firearms or Strength and Explosives skills. Alas, it makes little real difference when an opponent gets a bead on you. **RIGHT** You have a handful of agents to choose from at the start, with the rest added to the roster as you collect orbs of DNA from across the city. Each has perks that boost experience in individual skills



BELOW Climb and you can see for miles, letting you locate agility orbs. You can boost your traversal powers much quicker, but the lack of challenge in finding *and* reaching them takes away some of the fun



ABOVE An early CG cinematic features an impressively animated Terry Crews as default agent Jaxon. But subsequent story cutscenes use a relatively static hand-drawn comic-book style. It feels slightly cut-price

The Occupation

Set in a fictionalised version of 1987 Britain, *The Occupation* invokes an era when analogue and digital overlapped. The offices you poke around are equally likely to contain PCs or typewriters. Floppy discs share inventory space with vinyl records. Details of a potentially world-changing algorithm are daubed onto acetate sheets, ready for the overhead projector. This digital/analogue divide is even used to help characterise the game's two protagonists, via their wrists. Scarlet Carson, a recently widowed tech company executive, sports a delicate clockwork timepiece. Journalist Harvey Miller, investigating an explosion at Carson's offices, wears a chunky Casio knock-off. And the difference is hard to miss, because you check your watch a lot.

While the game alternates between the characters, at the heart of *The Occupation* are three timed sections, played as Miller. These each give you one hour to explore their small sandbox environment, gathering evidence and following leads, before applying everything you've learned in an interview sequence. The hour passes in realtime, with the space around you moving through its own set schedule – rooms being unlocked at certain times, a security guard leaving their desk for a five-minute break – as you scramble to explore every corner. Waiting for a printer to commit a file to paper or for a guard to turn their back is painful when you know it's time that could be spent finding more clues.

Alternatively, you can wait out the clock and take your chances with a couple of questions scribbled onto your pad, like a proper journalist. But you'll be hungry for every bit of information you can squeeze out of your 60 minutes, because *The Occupation* does a fantastic job of establishing its mystery. Carson-Bowman, site of the explosion, was collaborating with the British government on the Union Act. The exact details of this legislation – and the company's associated algorithm – are hazy, but the related anti-immigrant rhetoric and promises of extra money for the country are uncomfortably familiar. "One Britain. One People. One Vote," a propaganda poster declares, and we shudder. This is an alt-history version of '80s Britain, taking in both Orwell's 1984 and the era's unwelcome legacy in modern politics. There's certainly a lot of 2019 in the story's use of an algorithm to sort people into binary categories, and decide who is – and isn't – a valid citizen.

Turing, the fictional northern city where *The Occupation* takes place, is a setting to rival *BioShock*'s Rapture or *Dishonored*'s Dunwall. Overgrown cut-throughs between houses; a branch knotted into frayed rope to create a makeshift swing; racist graffiti on brick; wheelie bins and light in high windows; rain beating against glass and a persistent grey – this is Britain reflected through small, authentic details. And those details go beyond static props. Protective cases will need

Developer White Paper Games
Publisher Humble Bundle
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

The penalty for failure becomes losing chunks of story – especially frustrating when it's unclear why you were caught



SING IT BACK

Developer White Paper doesn't seem too interested in '80s nostalgia, but it is fascinated with the music of the era. The game's soundtrack is split between three in-game radio stations: classical, chilled acoustic, and pop hits. The last one is the highlight – original music with touches of glam rock, post-punk and new wave that evokes the period, especially in its production, without resorting to easy tropes. The game's optional collectibles come in the form of vinyl records. And, unlike most records in 2019, they're intended to actually be listened to – you place it on the turntable, lift the arm, and even set the RPM, giving you the opportunity to take these lovingly-crafted tunes and give them the chipmunk treatment.

to be manually slid off using the analogue stick. The blinds on an office window can be shut with a tug of the cord, then twiddled open. You can even flick the metallic slide on a floppy disc and watch it ping back into place.

This sense of tactility helps enliven the game's moment-to-moment action, which consists largely of rifling through cabinets, sneaking through vents and reading documents. The downside of these analogue interactions is that they're often fiddly – simply pressing the correct button on a cassette player can be a feat – and sometimes refuse to work at all. *The Occupation* is startlingly ambitious: an interactive political thriller attempting to blend *Deus Ex*-style immersive sims with 'walking simulator' narrative games like *Gone Home*, from a studio whose headcount is barely in the double digits. Sadly, there's a frequent sense that the game is tripping over that ambition.

Stealth, for example, is a pivotal part of the game, because your investigations take you into off-limits areas, but it's not especially robust. There's a single guard in the entire game – his name is Steve – but that doesn't make him any easier to predict. It's not entirely clear when you've been spotted, how it happened, or whether you can get away without being punished. Said punishment takes the form of Steve leading you calmly down to the security office, like you've been naughty and need to speak to the headmaster. The stakes might be lower than your average stealth game but the personal connection makes it more tense. Death or social awkwardness? We'll take the reaper any time.

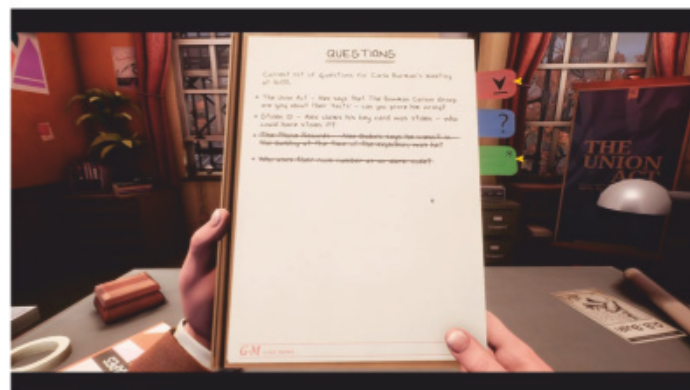
The problem is that this isn't the only cost. Initially you'll lose precious minutes. But eventually security will confiscate your briefcase, meaning you have to play the rest of the game with an inventory of no more than one item. From then on, being caught means you'll be kicked out before you can meet your interviewee. If this happens, the story will advance without you, and there's no way to return to an earlier save. The penalty for failure becomes losing chunks of story – especially frustrating when it's unclear why you were caught. And the game doesn't explain any of this beforehand.

The Occupation attempts, and frequently succeeds at, a lot of things games commonly avoid. It translates a mystery story into mechanics in a way rarely seen outside of *Her Story* and *Return Of The Obra Dinn*. It's thematically rich, with an interesting setting, and does a great job of embodying the player in its world. It's good at the softer, human, analogue things but – appropriately for a game that's partly about the limitations of technology – struggles with anything more mechanical, like the simple binary of detection in stealth, or a fail state. Maybe it's too naturalistic for something as stark as a 'game over' screen, but *The Occupation*'s design could take a few cues from its world when it comes to balancing the analogue and the digital.

RIGHT Don't fancy betraying the trust of Steve the security guard? You can while away the hour just browsing the office's gallery and listening to their audio guides.

MAIN Every object in the world has a chunky physicality. Pop open a hatch on the bottom of a computer monitor and you'll be able to alter its brightness by turning a knob.

BOTTOM The interviews aren't the game's most compelling sections – you're sat in a fixed position watching someone deliver their answers – but they pay off your investigations nicely



ABOVE Your objectives, clues and details of the area you're exploring are all recorded on paper, in a folder that can be confiscated if you're caught sneaking around too often – which can lead to frustration later

Trials Rising

More than ever before, each track in *Trials Rising* is a spectacle to be savoured. It's like a Busby Berkeley production where the dancing girls and their ostrich feathers have been substituted for swinging girders and falling planks. Like riding a motocross bike through The Truman Show's tightly choreographed facsimile of reality, or along an OK Go music video. To view them simply as vehicular obstacle courses isn't doing Red Lynx's artistry justice. They're a collection of Hollywood set-pieces you happen to be passing through at precisely the right time.

This is a return to form for the series, then, after a few years in the wilderness during which *Trials Fusion* and *Trials Of The Blood Dragon* happened to no one's particular delight or, really, attention. Perhaps it seemed as though the idea of guiding a QWOP-alike motorcyclist along 2.5D courses had been played out, its every conceivable creative vein already mined by previous iterations. The series has been going for over two decades now, if you count the Java game countless school children played in furtively secreted browser windows during their IT lessons. Longtime *Trials* players have such extensive muscle memory skills by now that every possible sequence of obstacles can be, and has been, traversed. What mountains are left to climb? As it transpires: plenty of them.

It says a lot for the tracks in *Trials Rising* that it barely matters that the handling feels identical to that of *Fusion* and its older ancestors. The physics simulation is still tethered in the realm of the slapstick, and bike wheels still have a way of lodging themselves through solid objects. Once in every hundred runs, those momentary lapses seem like unforgivable failings to deliver to you the platinum medal you did your bit to attain; the other 99 per cent of the time the sheer slapstick comedy of it all prevails.

Not that this isn't still an endeavour with a nigh-infinite skill ceiling. The deft touches that make the difference between landing perfectly in the groove of a ramp or bouncing awkwardly off it take a long time to reveal themselves and sink into your thumbs. Feathering the brake and throttle in mid-air; knowing precisely how many back or front flips to attempt in order to carry the right amount of momentum – these things still take time, and thousands of restarts.

It also says a lot that the game's able to pull off a presentation style that squarely summons 2005: skate punk in its soundtrack, and a world-tour conceit where events pop up on an atlas in linear fashion. Polish off one batch, and the next few will pop into being in a new region, this time that bit trickier.

Before you become too confused as to whether you've slipped back through the fabric of time and ended up in a *Tony Hawk* game, though, thoroughly modern trappings make themselves known. By far the

Developer Red Lynx
Publisher Ubisoft
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now

A quasi-multiplayer touch introduces ghost riders, their data pulled from other players and sent into your game



LOVE AND DEATH

Special mention must go to the many Machiavellian methods of executing its riders that *Trials Fusion* realises. Players have been sending their avatars into flame pits and brick walls for years – decades – now. That's old hat. The ignominious ends in *Rising* are something special, though, each one a perfect punchline to the track-long slapstick comedy routine. It has to be said that riding full-speed into an open refrigerator, which for reasons best known to itself promptly explodes, takes some beating. There's a perverse thrill in watching your rider succumb to obstacles you helped them avoid just moments before, too: flipping over an exploding car and then riding headlong into another, or jumping across one bottomless chasm in order to reach the depths of another.

most welcome is a quasi-multiplayer touch which introduces ghost riders to each race. Not just bronze, silver and gold medal times, but riders with mistakes and eccentricities in their runs, their data pulled from other players and sent into your game as an invading force to be quashed by your superior performances. It's a strange sensation, securing the gold medal time but still losing out to kevin_420 for overall speed. CPU-generated riders do fill the gaps, particularly in eight-strong race events, but nonetheless provide enough to bring out one's worst competitive tendencies. True, live multiplayer occurs either cooperatively via the ingenious tandem bike which introduces dual controls, or in traditional multiplayer race modes. There's more to be done once all the solo events are ticked off, then, but the latter do really feel like the main attraction.

Loot boxes round off *Trials Rising*'s modern touches, offering cosmetic customisation options every bit as enticing as the magazine selection in a dentist's waiting room. Within 50 loot boxes, the vast majority of items seem to be stickers, watering down the bike and rider items to an infuriating degree. The system simply didn't need to live within *Trials Rising* – although it can be ignored to no great penalty.

But for those ubiquitous cosmetic gubbins, the only bones to be picked with Red Lynx's inspired *Trials* comeback are technical ones. On PS4, frame drops in menus and at the end of each course are frequent, and that trademark texture buffering when an Unreal Engine game first loads an environment seems to take longer in *Trials Rising* than is usual, with some ground and trackside detail textures failing to upscale for quite a while. These are, of course, eminently fixable blemishes, and ones which may not appear across all platforms.

Back to that world tour. Many games have leaned on that structural conceit, but few use it as effectively as this. The geographical flavour of each event has real meaning, and cultural characteristics are often interwoven with such artistry that it almost seems a shame to just ride through them. You're taken from the explosion-laden sets of Hollywood movie studios to the famous tomato fight on the streets of Buñol, as if these were all perfectly reasonable venues for a trials course, and then before you have time to digest how much thought it must have taken for all those moving parts to sync up with your progression along that 2.5D plane, you're somewhere else in the world.

Virtual sightseeing usually happens in firstperson, with a gun bobbing around at the bottom of the screen and a map full of objectives. It's the big open worlds that take the plaudits for building a sense of place, and for drawing the player into an atmosphere. Never has a physics-based vehicular puzzle game bestowed such a vivid sense so generously before.



ABOVE The agony of losing a race despite winning a gold medal. The burning anger of watching the victor flaunt their cosmetic bobbins while you're stuck in dull clobber. It's all here in the race results screen



TOP Two decades in, the intrinsic thrill of throwing a bike towards outlandish, high-suicidal jumps still hasn't worn off. Red Lynx always manages to sell these moments harder in each successive game.

MAIN It's often wise to scrub some speed off before hitting a ramp, in order to minimise the time you spend in the air and land in sync with the track's undulations. This, however, is no such juncture.

LEFT The globe-trotting theme running throughout *Rising* is invigorating after *Fusion*'s dead-eyed cyberpunk stylings, giving each level its own character. Here we see China besieged by balloons

Far Cry New Dawn

The real star of *Far Cry New Dawn* is a nuclear bomb. Set a few decades after the apocalypse that closed out *Far Cry 5*, it takes its forebear's Montana and burns away much of its socio-historical context – reducing a milquetoast portrayal of militant evangelicism in America's heartlands to the basic principle of conquest that makes *Far Cry* such a dubious vehicle for political commentary. It features a few returning faces – prominent amongst them a careworn Joseph Seed, erstwhile prophet of a doomsday militia – and makes some show of reckoning with *Far Cry 5*'s nipped-off character arcs. But for the most part, it's a reset: the same open-world map, the same framework of guns, perks, vehicles and outposts, but without all the cavalier, headline-baiting bullshit about cults and radicalisation.

New Dawn's greatest strength, and weakness, is that it does not regard itself as worthy of serious discussion. It is a sandbox shooter hell-bent on burying its own history as both a world and a game, its grander edifices – including the fortresses where the Seeds once monologued about society and destiny – either ruined or inaccessible beneath layers of eerily fecund topsoil. Its plot is resolutely cursory, save for a few digressions on the subject of bad or absentee fathers. You are here to save a small valley settlement from the Highwaymen, a raider outfit led by two sisters who see the world much as players do: a collection of “problem-solvers” to recruit or protect and “problem-makers” who must be erased.

It's a game, above all, that trades on colour. Ubisoft's gameworlds have long been organised according to a distinct palette: handholds that gleam white through undergrowth, enemies with gaudy headscarves or helmets that are easily spotted from afar. In *New Dawn*, the palette has devoured the setting like a peculiarly calculating fungus. “Rusty” guns are ribald red; enemy outposts are eye-watering splashes of purple, held together by a sky-blue viscera of ladders and ziplines. The geography itself is a blaze of unearthly hues, calling to mind both *Far Cry: Blood Dragon* and the iridescent hinterland of Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*. Rivers glisten in a way that has you reaching for a non-existent Geiger counter, forests shimmer with blossom, and auroras fissure a skybox set to late summer.

The game tries to explain all this as an ecological reaction to years of nuclear fallout – there are mutant animals who sport glowing organs – but for the most part, it feels like artists letting their hair down. Similar sentiments apply to your new hub base, Prosperity, an IKEA-sourced jumble of wooden blocks and fairy lights in which crafting stations are signposted like stalls at a corporate Christmas Fayre. It's shockingly utilitarian next to the naturalised hubs of previous games, and in that regard, truer to the spirit of a series that has always treated “a sense of place” as grease for the wheels of pillage. *New Dawn* does not particularly care whether

Developer Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher Ubisoft
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

A sandbox shooter hell-bent on burying its own history as both a world and a game



DAD-ON FEATURE

New Dawn's theme of rubbish parenting suits a game about dealing with another game's toxic legacy. Mickey and Lou, the villains of the piece, are trying to live up to their renegade father's example; Joseph Seed, meanwhile, must reckon with a son who has lost patience with his Messianic tendencies. The player, too, has an inheritance to face up to – one of the escort characters you can recruit is in fact the previous game's protagonist, now a mute, masked Judge. These threads don't really lead anywhere, however – *Far Cry 4*'s crackpot examination of identity and family seems positively Oscar-worthy by comparison. In practice, Mickey and Lou are just another pair of mouthy trolls in a series that specialises in baiting its player.

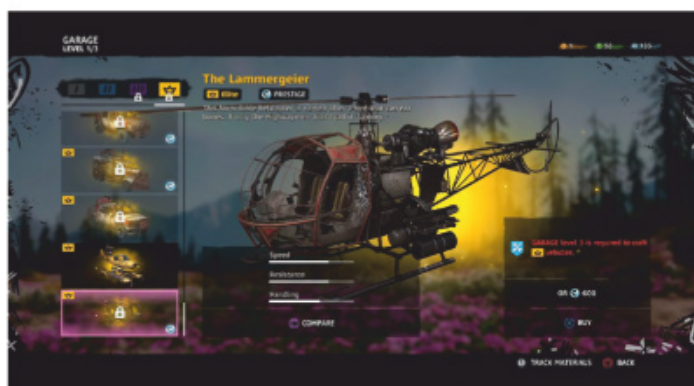
you find its setting plausible, as long as you find it pretty and know exactly what to shoot.

All of which may sound like a comeback, but *New Dawn*'s palate-cleanse is too long overdue to satisfy, and for every misguided element the game removes it adds another back in. The emphasis on colour also applies to the new levelling system, which suggests yet another ailing shooter universe trying to one-up *Destiny*, long past the point when one-upping *Destiny* made any kind of longterm business sense. Weapons and enemies now have rarity tiers, grey to gold, and to make headway against later foes, you'll need to search for prepper bunkers or kill rarer animals to upgrade Prosperity's crafting stations and unlock the best guns and vehicles.

In practice, you don't need to grind much – the game is generous with resources, especially the points you'll need for perks like a grappling hook or the ability to pick safe locks. You can also hand outposts you've captured back to the Highwaymen in order to recapture them against stiffer resistance for bonus barrels of ethanol, the key settlement-upgrading resource. That doesn't make it any less annoying, however, when you headshot a bare-headed goon and are treated to a meagre dusting of damage numerals. Nor does it make it any less frustrating when you try to cobble together a gun and are whisked away to the microtransactions screen.

The combat is as chaotic and diverting as it ever was, though it's sorely lacking a distinctive ability or weapon. The odd linear plot mission aside, *Far Cry*'s encounters again come in two broad varieties. There are outpost battles – tussles over small playgrounds of boltholes and overlooks where you might sabotage alarms to thwart reinforcements or set up traps. And then there are the roadside scuffles that escalate into pitched battles as AI partners and wandering predators pile in. One effect of *New Dawn*'s carelessness about itself is that you're less motivated to be stealthy, and the game rarely punishes you for this on Normal difficulty. Differences in level can usually be gamed by starting a fire or luring wildlife with a hunk of meat – your enemies will still take a while to perish, but they'll be too preoccupied to shoot back in the meantime.

New Dawn is a clearing of the air after *Far Cry 5*, but calling it a “new dawn” is preposterous. What we have here is a sideways hop, a purgatory of a sequel in a series that has no idea what to do with itself, beyond giving you another mapful of nodes to flip. As ever with *Far Cry*, the writing makes helpless acknowledgement of this in the shape of villains ranting about the futility of their and your actions, but the game is possibly more revealing away from the cutscenes. At one point, we turn to find our AI partner standing in the middle of a conflagration, yelling “Quit it!” at the flames. It's as good a summary of *Far Cry*'s identity crisis as any.



ABOVE The equipment grind is most grating when it comes to vehicles – helicopters, especially, require a generous injection of titanium. Fortunately, some AI companions come with their own transport



MAIN The game's base assaults lend themselves to co-op, as do Expeditions – short-lived trips to the surrounding world in which you must retrieve a package and then exfiltrate under fire.
ABOVE Joseph Seed is not one of *Far Cry*'s better villains, but discovering what has happened to him between games accounts for most of the plot's scanty intrigue.
LEFT The weaponry is garishly styled but on the whole pedestrian, ranging from pistols, shotguns and rifles to a bow for quieter assaults, and a bouncing sawblade launcher for rather louder ones

Dead Or Alive 6

The only body part we're admiring is a brass neck. Koei Tecmo insisted when *Dead Or Alive 6* was announced that it was toning down the series' ludicrous, lascivious fan service, as if it had finally cottoned on to the fact that a game of pendulous waifu dress-up is never going to appeal beyond a very specific audience. And a very vocal one, too: after a fan uproar, the publisher admitted that the sexy stuff was still there, and was always planned – it's just that the engine wasn't ready to show it. Quite the jailbait and switch.

Still, it's quite an engine, and not just when it comes to managing the complex, and seemingly autonomous, movements of a high-schooler's double Fs. Animations are balletic, combos flow naturally and blows hit home with a real sense of impact. That's particularly the case for the new Break system, which serves both as super combo and comeback mechanic and takes the form of a powerful close-up attack to your opponent's face.

For all that it has come to be known more for its jiggles than its juggles, there is magic to be found in the *DOA* combat system. Just about any combination of button presses produces an attack string, but you mustn't lapse into a routine, since the Hold system lets opponents stop predictable players in their tracks with

Costumes are about more than just looks: they're bound to the game's physics system, so the skimpier the get-up, the bigger the bounce. The effect can be turned off in the menus – oddly, the setting is called Violence

Developer Team Ninja
Publisher Koei Tecmo
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now



SEASON'S BEATINGS

On offer for just £73.99 is the game's first – yes, *first* – season pass. Paying more than the price of the game itself nets you over 60 new costumes, and just two characters, one of whom you'll have faced in the base game's singleplayer mode, which like the game's aesthetic is an idea we thought we'd all moved on from by this point. Another pass will follow in a few months, and we doubt it'll stop there: after all, buying every costume in *Dead Or Alive 5: Last Round* would run you over a grand.

a counter throw. Technical skill is all well and good, but the greatest element of fighting games is psychology, and it's something *DOA6* plays well to, as attackers modify their strings with high, mid or low inputs while the recipient tries to predict which direction an attack is coming from, and counter accordingly.

The story mode, however, is absolute nonsense even by this genre's basement-level standards. Branching paths purport to offer control over proceedings, but you're best off picking the quickest route to the final chapter, if you really must bother at all. Things improve markedly in the smartly assembled *DOA Quest* mode, which tasks you with meeting objectives in battle, a button prompt by the more opaque tasks taking you to a tutorial that explains them, then has you try it out.

Before long, though, you're reminded that this is a game of dressing up. Each completed challenge awards costume parts, a currency that unlocks racier alternatives to the relatively conservative default outfits; you'll need coins, also earned through play, if you want to equip them. The male characters have just one each to chase. The women have up to five, and more will follow through DLC (see 'Season's beatings'). What used to be a decent fighting game with comical breast physics is now a pervier *DOA Xtreme* with punches instead of presents. Honestly, we're getting a bit old for it, and so is the industry around it.

5





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Hypnospace Outlaw

Set in an eye-watering evocation of an alternative late-1990s Internet, where users don a headband to go online as they drift off, Jay Tholen's follow-up to offbeat adventure *Dropsy* is as captivating as it is dizzyingly strange. It casts you as a moderator of sorts, tasked with patrolling a series of authentically ugly, gaudy Geocities-like web pages, looking for a variety of transgressions. These range from illegally distributed software to copyright infringement, targeted harassment and questionable images: your job, at least for a while, is to find the links and highlight them to your superiors, bringing down your corporate gavel for a relative pittance in virtual currency.

Your role grows more complex, involving smart use of bookmarks and tags, before asking you to dig deeper, accessing password-protected links (which can be deciphered or brute forced) and locating pages hidden from standard searches. The process combines the archival research and retro aesthetic of *Her Story* with the cross-checking and overarching mystery of *Papers, Please*, but it's arguably most reminiscent of *Return Of The Obra Dinn*. It too becomes a detective game where information is delivered unconventionally, inviting you to rely on powers of observation, memory and

Your desktop assistant comes with a welcome accessibility feature: right-click on any text and they'll read it out. It comes in handy, since some pages are purposely badly designed, such that links are difficult to parse

Developer Tendershoot
Publisher No More Robots
Format PC
Release Out now



WINDOWS SHOPPING

In several cases, there are more violations to discover than you need to close the file, and you can spend time seeking them out – perhaps also flagging up any users responsible for multiple infractions – to trouser a small bonus. The Hypnocoins you earn can be spent personalising your desktop: you can download a range of screensavers and wallpapers, some of that delightfully awful music and even a virtual pet – true to form, these perish quickly when starved of attention.

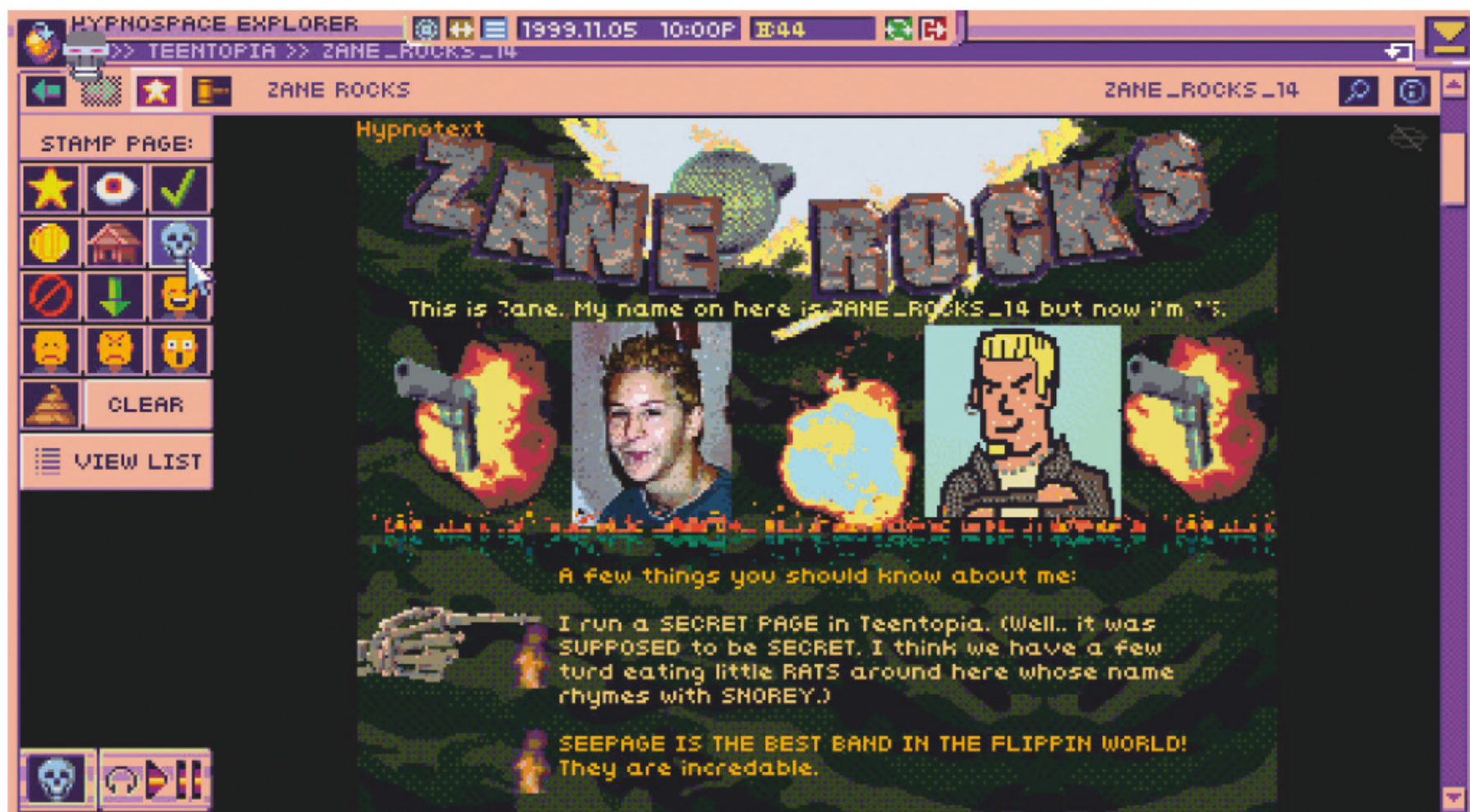
deduction to piece together solutions from clues found in different places and via different methods.

As with Lucas Pope's game, it's worth keeping a pen and paper handy. It also boasts an obstinate self-assurance in its approach, and is so committed to the consistency of its fiction that it draws you in completely. Occasionally it goes too far: glitches and viruses are perhaps too realistically irritating, and though faster than dial-up the deliberate loading delays – which you can speed up by wiggling the mouse pointer, just as we once imagined – can grow tiresome in the moments you become lost in a sea of broken hyperlinks.

Yet an in-game hint system – hidden, but easily found – awaits when you get totally stuck. And besides, during that trawl you'll find countless amusing details. As a parody of the nascent Internet, it's meticulously observed, from disaffected teens to Christian mums, conspiracy theorists, wannabe hackers, hideous jingles and overanalysis of terrible rock songs. Put it this way: we hope Tholen is working on a Chowder Man spin-off.

It's a vicious yet oddly affectionate depiction of a time that feels so recent and yet so long ago. It will, inevitably, mean more to those who were there and suffered through it, but don't be put off if you weren't. This clever, funny, hallucinatory head trip may leave you frazzled, but Tholen's wonderfully singular vision will be burned into your brain for a long time.

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Devotion

After probing a country's anxieties in *Detention*, Taiwanese developer Red Candle Games zooms in for a tale of familial strife, taking a step forward in time and a giant leap in ambition. It's the 1980s, and screenwriter Feng Yu is struggling with his latest script following negative reviews for his last film. Wife Li Fang, an actress and singer, has put her career on hold to look after their daughter, Mei Shin, whose mystery illness is stifling all three. As you explore their apartment across three different years, you'll awaken spectres of the past, but this is a horror game with a much keener interest in exploring personal demons.

Before long, you're able to access the apartment in 1980, '85 and '86, each year prompting a decisive shift (or schism) in the family dynamic. As Feng Yu, your job is to uncover secrets, or dormant memories — he may not be able to mend the past, but can perhaps come to terms with it. A blurry photo is restaged with a new camera, yielding a code to open a padlocked cupboard, while items from past and future are later combined in a ritual. The puzzles aren't difficult, but challenge isn't the point: your role is simply to arrive at the truth.

We've been in haunted houses before, but this is no ordinary ghost story. Sure, on occasion the developer

Feng Yu's lighter illuminates darkened rooms. You won't always like what you find but it pays to be thorough — the notes you find (including fragments of his screenplays) are more vital than your average optional collectable

Developer/publisher
Red Candle Games
Format PC
Release Out now



CHARADE IN TAIWAN

Shortly after its release in late February, *Devotion* was abruptly removed from Steam. As Red Candle tells it, some placeholder text was left on an in-game poster; unfortunately, said text was a Chinese Internet meme comparing president Xi Jinping to Winnie The Pooh. A review-bombing campaign left the game with a miserable rating, prompting the developer to take it down. We hope to see it back on Steam before long, and are publishing this review in the hope — and belief — it'll return.

rummages through its box of scary tricks and pulls out something familiar — a child's doll, artfully posed mannequins, the sound of weeping around a corner — but each serves the story. Unlike, say, *Layers Of Fear* or Hideo Kojima's *P.T.*, *Devotion* isn't content to rely upon a grab-bag of creepy imagery and crude shocks.

Meanwhile, the player's own unease is mirrored by the apartment's restlessness; supposedly static objects move and rooms transform when your back is turned. Between the emotional intensity of the underlying narrative and the stifling moment-to-moment atmosphere, charged with a constant prickly tension, it's the kind of place you explore with a permanent knot in your stomach. Even with no player death, the sub-three-hour runtime feels like a small mercy given the circumstances, and yet it's just right to tell its story of faith, sacrifice and familial disquiet.

We may have no experience of 1980s Taiwan, but *Devotion* carries the tang of authenticity in both the sharply observed detail of its setting and its more imaginative flourishes, including a gorgeous interactive storybook episode. Yet if the specificities of the setting are part of the appeal, and the cultural references key to the story, its central tragedy is underpinned by stresses and fears anyone can identify with. It wants to make you cry as well as jump — and it succeeds handsomely on both scores.

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How Birmingham City University can help
you get your game business off the ground

Games@STEAMhouse is a free programme dedicated to helping creatives and entrepreneurs kickstart their new venture, and is at the centre of Birmingham City University's drive to help grow new game businesses in the Midlands. Zuby Ahmed, associate professor in game design at Birmingham City University and co-lead at Games@STEAMhouse, tells us more about the initiative's plan to support Midlands-based game businesses, and what it can offer budding entrepreneurs.

What is the aim of Games@STEAMhouse, and who should apply?

Although there are numerous pathways to choose from once you become a STEAMhouse member (either through being a sole trader or by owning or setting up a new limited company), the initiative focuses on helping you understand and launch your new venture into either the game industry or even something related to games. It can specifically be a videogame you need help with developing, producing or taking to market; it could be something game-related (either digital or non-digital) or even gamification-based.

What support does the programme offer?

You immediately benefit from 12 hours of targeted advice, where you'll participate within consultancy meetings or group workshops, focused on videogame design, production and business management. We even run game jams, both digital and non-digital, so that people can experiment with their ideas. The latest one has one of our members developing a card game that she wishes to take to market.



The programme itself grew from BCU's game courses at the New Technology Institute. Many of their recent graduates went on to help create *Red Dead Redemption 2*

What are you hoping to achieve?

We want to create and nurture opportunities for people with their new exciting ventures, so they go onto flourish, strive and survive in a competitive and dynamic industry. We hope that phase one of the STEAMhouse project allows us to develop phase two – an even larger incubation space and support space for more businesses to join and grow within.

Where can people sign up to the Games@STEAMhouse programme?

If you are interested in accessing free support to help grow your games business, apply at steamhouse.org.uk/blog/games. We also plan to be at EGX Rezzed in April to network further, so we hope to meet you there too. ■

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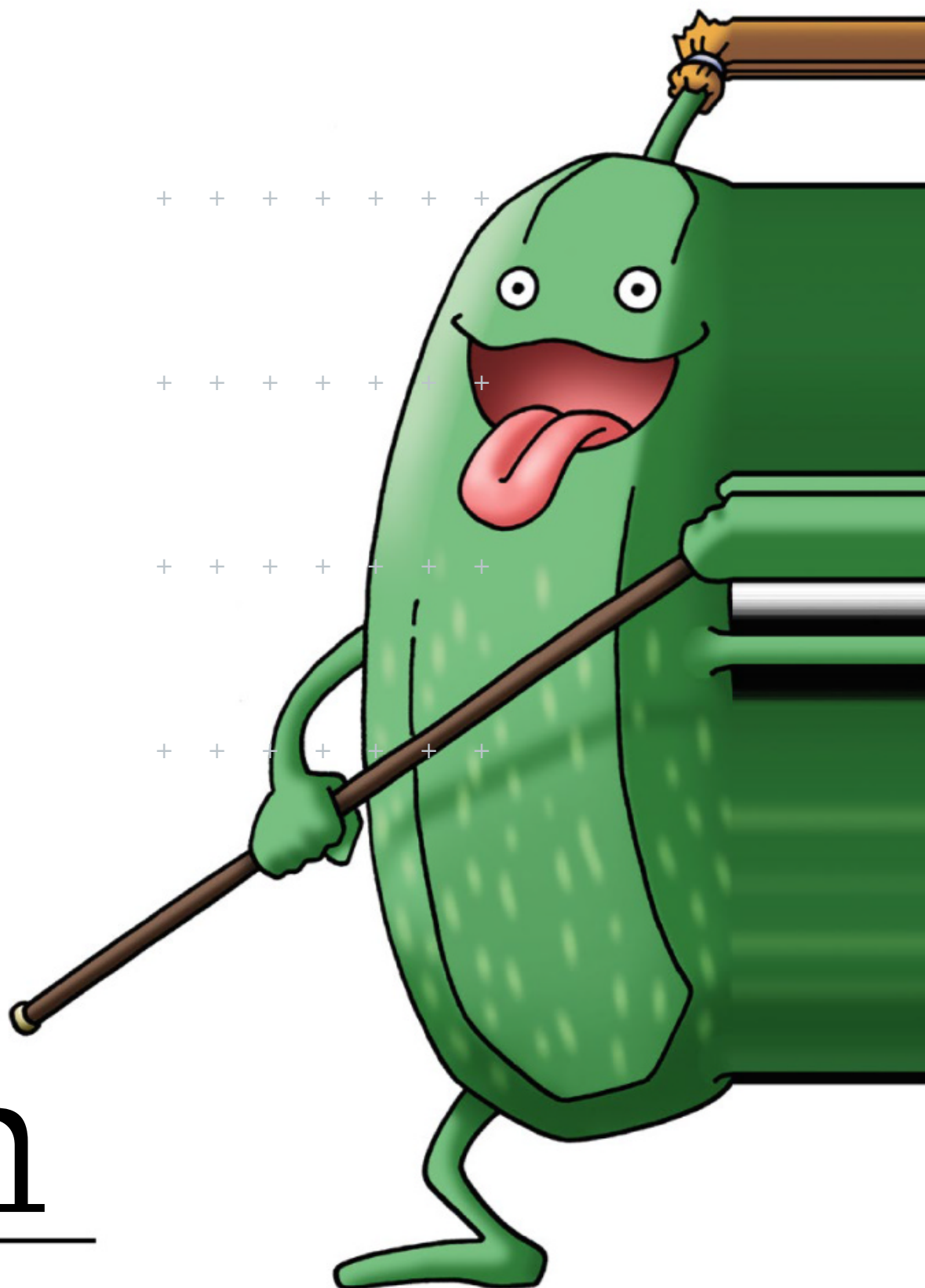


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Dragon Quest IX

How a JRPG grind taught
us the value of mortality

By JON BAILES

Developer Level-5 Publisher Nintendo Format DS Release 2010

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Dragon Quest IX is a matter of life and death. In its structures it marks the passing and rebirth of a genre, or the realisation that the many ancient traditions enshrined in the series' past must be remade in new forms. In its stories it wants to explore the effects and value of human finitude – and also the eternal role of the traditional JRPG hero.

Modern sensibilities are at the forefront of the game's design. Random battles are replaced by visible monsters roaming the field, sidequests are clearly signposted and tracked, and combat is swift and accessible. Then there's the wireless co-op play, whose introduction cannot but make aspects of the old formula obsolete. It all creates a sense of freshness, whether joining another player's adventure, accessing regular DLC updates of quests and rare items, or simply going solo through the main quest. And surprisingly these changes serve to expand, rather than dilute, the narrative scope of the game.

The clearest risk *Dragon Quest IX* takes in realising its structural adjustment is to sacrifice the notion of the classic JRPG party. In accommodating the option for players to take their personalised avatars into each other's worlds, there's no room for the usual cast of misfit personalities and their accompanying backstories. Instead, the gang that goes into turn-based battle is made up of human players or hired help, neither of which can be written into the story. Even the user-defined main character has to remain an empty cipher, and is less substantial than a typical silent protagonist.

If a lack of central characters may sound disastrous for a JRPG, however, the plot in *Dragon Quest IX* adjusts to suit. You are cast as an immortal guardian angel, sent from a heavenly realm to protect mortals and gather 'benevolence' – a manifestation of their gratitude. You simply aren't part of the social context of the main world, and your entire motivation is encapsulated in this duty. Before long, a mysterious attack on your home, the Observatory, sends you plummeting to earth at the expense of your halo and wings, rendering you visible to ordinary folk. But you remain a transient

entity whose only aim is to help mortals in order to return home.

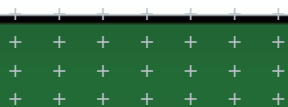
The effect of this setup is to force a focal shift in the narrative away from the player character and onto the lives of the game's NPCs. *Dragon Quest* games often zoom in on the details of the locals' stories, but here, cut off from the tribulations of the immortals for long stretches and with no traditional party to share the attention, the populations of the world's settlements take centre stage. You help these people and they are glad of that, but in doing so the demands of your mission fade into the background.

As each village or city you visit functions as a distinct episode, what really links everything together is a thematic thread. And while it may be unexpected, given the game's cheerful audiovisual veneer, the constant in that theme is death. This is not the sort that comes from terrible deeds, however, where a culprit can be identified and blamed; rather it's the kind of mundane demise that comes from old age, illness or daily struggles. The people you meet have been struck by tragedy, sure, but rarely by injustice.

There's the tale of the rogue undead knight who roams the land searching for a lost love long after her death. There's the young researcher whose wife succumbs to the plague that he is desperately trying to cure; a girl in a fishing village left orphaned when her father is killed at sea; a wealthy but sickly child who dreams of leaving her mansion and making friends before she dies. In all these cases and more, there's a single lesson that applies as much to the ghosts of the dead as it does to those who remain: they must accept their lot and manage to move on. For the living this means facing up to the legacies and reputations of their predecessors, confronting their guilt, or escaping the shadow of their upbringing. For the ghosts, it's the realisation that they can no longer protect their loved ones, merely hope for their mistakes to be fixed and come to terms with their regrets.

These are stories of monsters, curses and magic. Yet they are also highly relatable tales of missed opportunity, familial pressure and independence. Their poignant outcomes stay with you more than the major plot twists, and the repeatedly reinforced theme is more powerful because there are no ►

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strong protagonists to get in its way. Some episodes are less substantial than others, but don't outstay their welcome, and still build on the central idea. And if at times their pathos clashes with the game's translation, with its daft puns and phonetically transcribed regional accents (the plague story, for example, set in the town of Coffinwell with characters called Dr. Phlegming and Catarrhina, might have benefited from a gentler touch), at least the range of voices emphasises the sense of universality, and the humour ensures the tone is never overly morose.

In fact, despite its focus on death, *Dragon Quest IX*'s message is one of optimism. It is ultimately a celebration of mortality, depicting death as not only an end but also the beginning of a new cycle of human endeavour, as people forge their own paths



The Quester's Rest inn is a key location in the game – the hub for recruiting allies, joining up with friends, accessing DLC and alchemy. You can also sleep there

eventually unleashing his anger on the world and threatening to destroy it. The worst part of his fate is his inability to die or evolve as the world moves on outside. Without death there is no resolution, no forgiveness.

So what does all this say about your role as a protagonist, if you can call it that, who is after all also an immortal? More than anything, even with the eventual world-saving plotline that emerges, it's a sign of

IT IS ULTIMATELY A CELEBRATION OF MORTALITY, DEPICTING DEATH AS NOT ONLY AN END BUT ALSO A BEGINNING

based on the knowledge and experience passed on from the previous generation. Mistakes are made and selfish actions lead to terrible suffering, but the reverse of this is always the potential to do things better, to learn and grow.

Most of all, the lives of the immortals put human flaws and misery in perspective. These are lives with no cycle, only an endless flat existence, and no internal contradiction to inspire change. All the celestial beings have is their responsibility, and otherwise appear to persist in a state of pious abstinence. And in the game's main villain it becomes clear that the potential for suffering in everlasting life far outweighs the tragedy of death. This is another fallen immortal, Corvus, who spends centuries rotting in a forgotten prison cell, contemplating his betrayal by humans,

your limitations. Throughout the game you help mortals, both living and deceased, to cope – by delivering messages, finding lost items, exploring nearby dungeons and overcoming bosses. But all this comes with a constant reminder that you're powerless against the rhythms of mortality itself; that no hero, however great they are, can truly fix the world.

A subtle reversal of the JRPG, or the idea that the player character is the agent of the world, and NPCs are one-dimensional automata who merely aid the player's quest, is at work here. As a guardian angel it's you who have no interests, cares, ambitions or even ethical conviction. All you do is complete your assigned goals. Conversely, the NPCs at least appear human in how they adapt to their circumstances through the



The monsters are often delightfully named. You can't help smiling at encounters with cruelcumbers and meowgicians



TRADE UNION

To maintain the long post-credits grind, *Dragon Quest IX* provides an intricate levelling system, with each member of your group able to access and switch between a dozen different trades. As you level up in your current profession you spend skill points on weapon- or class-related abilities and bonuses, which can carry across when you decide to start a new vocation. You'll also be able to 'revocate' once you max out your level in any class to restart from the beginning and earn even more points. It's a highly flexible system which allows each character to gradually build towards a full set of skills, and lets you tailor the setup of the squad to effectively combine abilities in tactically diverse ways.

The JRPG town continues much as it always has. Feel free to chat to the locals, ransack their houses and perhaps smash a few pots



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Playing solo you create a team of mercenaries to fight alongside you, and after dozens of hours of adventures it's genuinely hard not to think of them as proper characters

narrative. This is the underlying truth of the genre, where players are in effect always guardian angels — beings who can never really die and exist to fulfil a range of externally imposed objectives without question or meaningful choice. For players, experience is measured in levels and stats. For the NPC, experience is the fuel of maturity, deeper bonds and moral reflection.

Dragon Quest IX's story is a reminder that all the succour you offer those NPCs is nothing more than a transaction. Guardians help people in return for benevolence, and even when your objectives change as the story develops they remain reward-oriented. The mortals may be weak, unreliable and self-interested, but they are also capable of acting with empathy, or even sacrificing their lives. Your help is never an act of

kindness; it is a job that demands tangible progress or better equipment as a result.

In the game's finale, the main character becomes a mortal of a kind, and after the credits roll returns to the world. Here you're introduced to a torrent of post-story content in the guise of further sidequests and procedurally generated dungeons where tough monsters and valuable crafting materials reside. There's also a range of super bosses, many in the form of antagonists from previous *Dragon Quest* games, that can be beaten countless times to test your prowess. It's an immortal's paradise, with nothing to do except battle endless monsters to collect infinite treasures and watch the completion percentages on various lists gradually build towards 100. If you get pulled into this addictive loop, it's easy to forget that the human stories ever really mattered.

The result is a strange juxtaposition. On one hand, a superb immortal simulator that boils the JRPG hero down to its essence with a never-ending checklist of things to do purely for their own sake. On the other, a game that dwells on the advantages of mortality, in your ability to grow personally by forging relationships with others, even if they are doomed to end in tragedy. But if these two sides seem irreconcilable, it should be remembered that this is a game built to be shared. In that co-op functionality a touch of humanity is injected into the grind itself, and makes you a little more than a mere immortal. ■

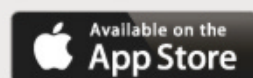


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T H E L O N G G A M E

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Sea Of Thieves

Developer Rare Publisher Microsoft Studios Format PC, Xbox One Release 2018

The sea is a fierce and fickle thing — so too, it seems, are living games in 2019. *Sea Of Thieves'* launch last year garnered a mixed reaction: some were content to make their own fun in a watery playground with the creative tools Rare's multiplayer pirate sim offered, while others were dissatisfied by its repetitive structure and lack of things to do. A slow but steady stream of free updates appeared — new instruments and shanties to play, challenges offering special currency, and fresh threats such as erupting volcanoes, AI skeleton ships and megalodons.

Players came and went. And then popular streamer Summit1g swaggered onto the servers at the beginning of the year. Suddenly, an audience that had written off the game was seeing its favourite streamer pulling off grand cartoon larceny and laughing himself sick in the process. Soon, fellow streaming stars Ninja and Dr Disrespect followed suit with some swashbuckling of their own, and *Sea Of Thieves* found itself occupying the coveted number-one spot on Twitch. The wave had finally crested, as Rare hoped it might.

One of the great curiosities of videogames nowadays is that often, the proof isn't in the playing, but in the watching. So it has been with *Sea Of Thieves*, which has seen an uptick in player numbers ever since that recent swell of streamer interest. In Rare's case, it's a little bit

of luck and a remarkable amount of foresight that has led to the sudden resurgence of a struggling game. *Sea Of Thieves'* design was always about leaving enough space for the imaginative to create something unique. It just needed the right people to show, on a big enough platform, that it was possible.

Then again, that influx of loot-hungry new players demonstrated how fundamentally unsuited a game such as *Sea Of Thieves* is to being a mainstream sensation. Part of playing pirates is, indeed, embracing the possibility of being swindled at any given moment. When it's happening every other minute, however, the thrill of uncertainty fades. To that end, forthcoming new mode The Arena will serve as a fitting place for PvP showdowns, and should help better preserve the delightfully mercurial nature of Rare's PvPvE seas.

But by now, it's clear that some things will never change: anyone returning in hopes of an overhaul of the deliberately pedestrian voyaging structure will be disappointed. Stubborn old Rare is sticking to its guns, and an alternative idea of where meaningful 'content' in a multiplayer game should come from. In an age where it must be tempting to adapt one's vision to follow the unpredictable winds of favour, there's something wickedly subversive about how steadily Rare is steering its new flagship through the storm. ■



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